

VISIT...

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10

Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**

Average of 25 ●
x 365 days
x 300 years
x (2+2 EXP)
Level 99

I've Been Killing
SLIMES for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level

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★ I've Been Killing
SLIMES for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level. ★



Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by Benio

10





I don't know if I can handle this...

They're looking at us, too...

I will be participating today with these two!

That dragon-girl is so cool!

You two, please look at us, too!

Strike a pose!

Please marry me!

Good luck, Wynn!

We're rooting for you!



Blue Dragon-Girl
Flatorte



Contents

We Went to a **Sweets Fair**

We Met a **Strange Fortune-Teller**

We Went to the Adventurers' Meet
with **My Stepdaughter**

We Entered the **Adventurers' Meet** with My Stepdaughter

We Went to the **Don Braco Peach Festival**

Keeping the Ancient Civilization **Cool**

Flatorte **Got Her Act Together**

We Almost Entered a **Cashless Society**

SPIN-OFF

Food for an Elf

Some Local Specialties Have **Rules**
That Always Trip Up **First-Timers**, Right?

You Still Get Hungry in
Unfamiliar Foreign Lands, Don't You?

Story by Kisetsu Morita Illustration by Benio

She slaughtered slimes for 300 years...

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I've Been Killing **SLIMES** for 300 Years
and Maxed Out My Level 10



Kisetsu Morita
Illustration by **Benio**

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I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level, Vol. 10

KISETSU MORITA

Translation by Jasmine Bernhardt

Cover art by Benio

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SLIME TAOSHITE SANBYAKUNEN, SHIRANAIUCHINI LEVEL MAX NI
NATTEMASHITA vol. 10

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[We Went to a **Sweets Fair**](#)

[We Met a **Strange Fortune-Teller**](#)

[We Went to the Adventurers' Meet with **My Stepdaughter**](#)

[We Entered the **Adventurers' Meet** with My Stepdaughter](#)

[We Went to the **Don Braco Peach Festival**](#)

[Keeping the Ancient Civilization **Cool**](#)

[Flatorte **Got Her Act Together**](#)

[We Almost Entered a **Cashless Society**](#)

[Some Local Specialties Have **Rules That Always Trip Up First-Timers**, Right?](#)

[You Still Get Hungry in **Unfamiliar Foreign Lands**, Don't You?](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)



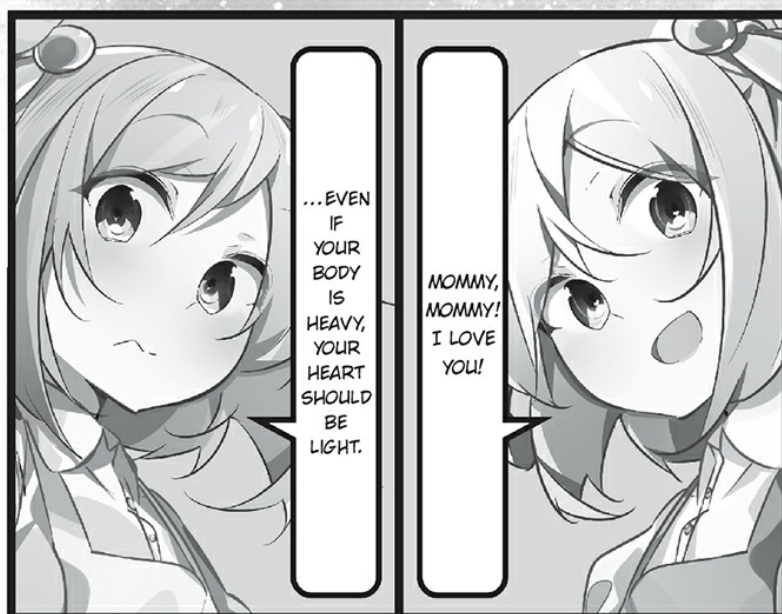
AZUSA AIZAWA

The protagonist. Commonly known as the Witch of the Highlands. A girl (?) who was reincarnated as an immortal witch with the appearance of a seventeen-year-old. Before she knew what was happening, she'd become the strongest being in the world. Although she's had some rough times, it has ultimately given her a family, and she's delighted about it.

HALKARA

A young elf woman and Azusa's apprentice. She is an upstanding CEO who runs a company using her knowledge of mushrooms, but in the house in the highlands, she's known for her knack for screwing up. She is the main character of the bonus story, "Food for an Elf," that's included in this book.





FALFA AND SHALSHA

Spirit sisters born from a conglomeration of slime souls. Falfa, the older sister, is a carefree girl who's honest about her own feelings. Shalsha, the younger sister, is considerate and attentive to others. They both love their mother, Azusa.

LAIKA AND FLATORTE

Red and blue dragon-girls who live in the house in the highlands. Laika is Azusa's apprentice and a good, hardworking girl. Flatorte is a cheerful, energetic girl who obeys what Azusa says. They tend to compete with each other as fellow dragons.



BEELZEBUB

A high-ranking demon known as the Lord of the Flies and the demons' minister of agriculture. She frequently shuttles between the demon realm and the house in the highlands. She's Azusa's reliable "big sister" surrogate and the protagonist of the spin-off in this book, "I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister."



SANDRA

A mandragora girl. After growing for three hundred years, she gained sentience and the ability to move around. She is a literal plant and lives in the vegetable garden in the house in the highlands. She's often stubborn and puts up a front, but she also craves the company of others.

ROSALIE

A ghost girl and resident of the house in the highlands. She's devoted to Azusa, who didn't shy away from her as a ghost and instead reached out to her. She can go through walls but can't touch people. She can also possess others.



YUFUFU

A droplet spirit (a variety of water spirit). She has a great broad-mindedness that can coax even Azusa—she's everyone's momma who pokes her nose in everyone's business.





WYNONA

A slime spirit born after Falfa and Shalsha. She's cautious and is distant with Azusa, whom she treats like a stepmother. She's already actively a top-rated adventurer, but she's oddly obsessed with the color white.

ENO

The immortal Witch of the Grotto, who reveres Azusa as her senior. Though she has superior potion-making skills, she was making little progress since she didn't like other people seeing her put in effort, but then Azusa reasoned with her, and she changed her ways. She's active, but she sometimes butts heads with Halkara, who's in the same industry.



MUUM MUUM

Nickname: Muu. Sovereign of the ghosts' kingdom of the dead, as well as the ruler of an ancient civilization that is now destroyed. Though she had holed herself up after growing fed up with her wet-blanket people (the poltergeists), she made a return to society (?) after coming into contact with Azusa and Rosalie. She has an accent and loves banter.





WE WENT TO A SWEETS FAIR

“Here you go! I brought treats for you~!”

The sun had set, and Beelzebub arrived carrying a large box filled with packets of baked goods. In Earth terms, they were closest to madeleines or financiers.

I don’t think madeleines existed in medieval Europe, but I bet some civilization had invented something similar by then. Plus, this was a different world entirely.

“Yaaay! Thank you for the goodies, Miss Beelzebub! Falfa loves you!”

“Hooo...how precious... A critical hit...”

Falfa’s expression of affection almost knocked Beelzebub out. One of my daughters almost brought down a high-ranking demon; what a proud day.

“These are baked confectionaries from the Holy Knights’ Sweets, an old-standing shop in the royal capital. These are quite well-known.” Shalsha performed a thorough analysis before digging in.

“What?” I said. “If the shop is in the royal capital, that means you brought stuff from the human lands this time.”

Beelzebub’s gifts usually came from the demon lands, which was of course perfectly natural.

“Indeed. I have already brought gifts from the most notable shops in the town around Vanzeld Castle for my girls.”

How much has she bought? And the way she was calling them *my girls* was getting under my skin.

“That is why I have now shifted to the more well-known establishments in the human lands. You are all welcome to them, but I would appreciate some expression of gratitude. At least from those of you who are not my girls.”

Laika, Flatorte, and the rest of us were already digging in before Beelzebub said that. The only one who was abstaining was Halkara.

“I had too much to drink over dinner... It’ll come back up if I eat now, so I will wait...”

“You really need to know your limits...”

Halkara never learned. Why did she always make herself so sick?

“That isn’t it, Madam Teacher. I do know my limits. I have been an elf for a long time. I just can’t resist. The alcohol always wins.”

“To be honest, your self-awareness just makes it way worse,” I said with a great sigh.

Meanwhile, Beelzebub was not happy. “Flatorte! Do not eat so much all at once! These are gifts for the girls! They will vanish in an instant!” She tended to get extra strict when the twins were involved.

“What? But they’re so small. I need to eat five at a time; otherwise, it’s barely dessert.”

There was a huge pile of the little cookies stacked in front of Flatorte, almost like she was participating in an eating contest.

“You must show restraint. Your indolent lifestyle is making everything worse,” Laika, the other dragon, admonished Flatorte.

“Well, you’ve already eaten quite a bit yourself, Laika... But I know you dragons are big eaters, so I suppose I shall let it go...” Beelzebub acquiesced.

Laika also had three of the cookies sitting in front of her. Usually, you’d just take one.

“Shalsha is finished. I only needed to experience the rich, buttery flavor, so I don’t mind.”

“Falfa’s full, too! Thank you so much, Miss Beelzebub!”

Ironically, the two at the center of this whole event ate almost none of them...

But everyone was happy, which meant that the sweets accomplished their job as gifts. The box was empty by the time we were done.

Well, one of the two dragons would have definitely eaten whatever cookies were left, so I had to jump in and save some for Halkara for tomorrow. She could have it when she was sober.

“They were delicious. I, the great Flatorte, could eat another three hundred.”

“A shameless boast, Flatorte. You could have one hundred at the most.”

Might as well just break into the bakery itself...

“Hey, there’s something in here.” Falfa had made a discovery in the empty box—a little flyer. She was staring hard at it. “Mommy, there’s some kind of event happening!” She handed me the piece of paper.

Ooh, now what was this about?



The Royal SWEETS FAIR

Coming Soon!!

Sweets from all over the kingdom
are coming to the capital!
Your vote will decide who has the
tastiest treats in all the land!

**FREE ENTRY & still
accepting entrants who
think THEY are the
supreme ruler of sweets!**

WHEN:

The 65 Saints Day, Morning and Afternoon

WHERE:

Royal Capital, Dwarf Reclamation Square

“Hmm, a sweets fair... I guess this world really has everything...”

The human kingdom could be weird sometimes, although the demons definitely still had them beat.

I could see Falfa’s eyes glittering. She was going to ask to go, wasn’t she?

She would be a kid in a candy store—a kid among rows and rows of candy stores. It would be a dream come true.

But what Falfa actually said was nothing like what I was expecting.

“Let’s enter the event with our edible slimes!”

Oh! We’ll be competing!

Edible slimes, by the way, were this world’s first *manju*-style steamed buns. I’d created them after I trial-and-errored my way into a decent recreation of the Earth version.

We gave them slime-looking faces (?) with a little brand, so we called them *edible slimes*.

The bean jam was perfectly sweet, so you could eat a bunch just in one sitting. Went great with tea, too! In fact, it was fair to call it Flatta’s most famous confection. Not that it had any competition.

“Oh yeah, I used to make them myself, huh... I’ve got Halkara’s company taking care of production, so I totally forgot...”

It was too much work to make them myself every day to sell them at shops, and my job would go from witch to confectioner if I did that.

Normally, I’d just teach the process to someone that Halkara hired, and then they’d sell them in Nascúte. The only time I made them personally was for special occasions and when the mood struck me. But a festival like this was definitely a special occasion.

“Here is what Shalsha thinks: This is the perfect opportunity for us to share edible slimes with the rest of the country. We must not miss this chance.”

Shalsha was down, too. Well, then participating was our only option. In fact, the girls were so excited about this that they were gonna join with or without

me.

I didn't exactly want to make edible slimes famous or anything. If they got too well-known, then my relaxing lifestyle would ultimately vanish into a hectic mess. But we were way past that now.

“We can win this competition! We’ll be the best in the kingdom!”

Falfa was *really* into this! I could already tell this was more than a round of playing store to her. She was gearing up for battle.

“I’m not going to stop you from entering, so I’ll help you out,” I said. “But are edible slimes the best thing in the kingdom...? Not to be a downer or anything, but I’m not sure.”

They were just regular ol’ *manju*, after all. Even regular ol’ *manju* had rarity going for them in their world, but I highly doubted they were actually that delicious.

If anything, they were just comfy to eat and cheered me up a bit—I’m pretty sure that’s the job *manju* are supposed to serve anyway (in my personal opinion).

When I lived in Japan, every town out there sold their own kind of buns, but they kind of all tasted the same. People would go on trips and bring back the local sweets from their destination, but then I’d eat them and find it tasted really similar to something I’d already eaten from somewhere else (again, in my personal opinion). That was how things were supposed to be. That’s all *manju* needed to be (in my personal opinion anyway).

That’s why my edible slimes weren’t going to take first place in the kingdom. They were just something a witch made for fun in her spare time. No way they’d win against someone who’d spent decades of their life on confectionaries.

“Mommy, edible slimes *can* win. And Falfa isn’t just saying that because I’m excited. Falfa knows they’re good enough!” Falfa flexed her muscles (such as they were) and struck a pose.

“I can see you’re really enthusiastic about it, Falfa. It’s almost surprising.” I’ll admit, I was really happy she liked the treats her mommy came up with...

“After all, we have Big Sis Laika on our side! **And if we have Big Sis Laika manning the counter, we’ll sell like crazy!**”

“So *that’s* your plan!”

Everyone, including me, turned to look at Laika.

“What? What? What? Me? You want me to...sell them...?” She hesitantly turned a finger toward herself.

Everyone nodded.

Even our visitor Beelzebub nodded.

Yes. Laika’s customer contact skills were unbelievably high. Like, top-notch. We got a good look when we opened the Witch’s House Café. Her service wasn’t exactly god-tier, but her cuteness was leaps and bounds above everyone else.

In the second year of the Witch’s House Café, we had throngs of people who’d come from faraway places just to see Laika. She had enough influence to be considered a social phenomenon.

If we used her power during the fair, there was no doubt she’d contribute to our sales. We weren’t exactly using our flavors to compete in that case, but...it wasn’t like we could suddenly change how our product tasted.

“Shalsha asks the same. We want you to help us.”

“Let’s spread the word of edible slimes together, Big Sis Laika!”

My daughters were pushing this idea more than they usually would.

And it went without saying that Laika looked absolutely bewildered. “I don’t know if I...” She fidgeted, reluctant to answer. But that’s just Laika. If she suddenly went, *Yeah, I’ll do it, mate!* then people would think Muu had possessed her.

Then Beelzebub interjected into the conversation.

“Are you not currently in training? Then by engaging in a field you are not so

well versed in—customer service, in this case—you shall eventually improve yourself, no?”

Beelzebub, you aren't just pulling this out of your butt, are you...?

She was right about Laika's training, but she was doing so to get physically stronger. It didn't really have anything to do with treating customers well in stores. If that made any ounce of sense, then all the pro boxers from my past life would be taking up part-time jobs in retail so they could get better at boxing. Why not just, y'know...practice boxing?

Oh, she's covering for my daughters, isn't she?

Beelzebub would do anything to make Falfa and Shalsha happy, but I think forcing Laika to do a customer service job was somewhat missing the point. To be honest, though, I wanted to see her do it, too.

“A-all right... I will do it to improve myself!”

Laika was on board!

“Wait, Laika,” I said. “If you don't want to, you don't have to do it. And I don't think this has anything to do with your training...”

Afterward, Beelzebub would say to me, “I cannot believe you are not taking the girls' side in the matter! I shall take them, then!” And I would ignore her.

“No, it makes perfect sense. If I run away from the things that challenge me, I will never grow stronger. I shall take this opportunity to be the best I can be at customer service!”

She was taking this whole thing so seriously. Maybe if I took the dirt from under her fingernails and steeped it into a tea, I could share a bit of that earnestness with some of the more cavalier folks out there. Mmm, making other people drink fingernail dirt isn't a great business...

Anyway, I doubted she could get seriously injured dealing with customers buying sweets, and if she genuinely wanted to do it, then I didn't have to stop her.

“Thank you, Big Sis Laika!” Falfa flung her arms joyfully around Laika. *Hey, what about me?!*

And Beelzebub was genuinely shocked— “Ahhh! How unfair of you, Laika!” But I ignored her then, too. It was her idea anyway.

“I will do my best, Falfa!”

“Okay, then Falfa will give you thorough guidance, okay~?”

Falfa didn’t appear to be old enough to be providing any guidance, but the last time we sold edible slimes, she had clearly showed just how skilled she was in dealing with customers. It was a mystery as to where she got those skills from, though. From playing house?

Either way, she could at least teach Laika without a problem.

...I was still a little nervous, though, and since this was my daughter and apprentice here, I decided to tag along.

“Okay, Falfa will start teaching you first thing in the morning tomorrow! Are you ready?”

“Yes! I am more than ready, Little Master Falfa!”

“Little Master”? That almost sounds like a stage name.

No matter how it happened, Laika was going to be participating in the sweets fair.



The next morning, I woke up and went to the kitchen—and found Laika wearing her maid outfit.

“Oh, good morning, Lady Azusa!”

“Wow, you’re dressed and everything... It sure is a sight for sore eyes, but don’t get too overeager.”

“We have no guests right now, so I do not mind.” Laika grinned at me.

It’s like the sun! I’ve seen her almost every day, and I know her well, and I still can’t look directly at it!

“And I have always been interested in the edible slimes, so I think this would be a perfect opportunity.”

Interested how? Did she want to eat her fill of all the leftover *manju*...?

Then Falfa came in, also wearing a maid outfit. “Morning, Big Sis Laika! Morning, Mommy!”

Falfa was bright and cheerful no matter what she wore. She was always adorable.

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“Falfa’s going to teach you so much today, Big Sis Laika!”

“Yes! I am looking forward to it!”

“That’s the spirit! But you can’t be quite so forceful around customers, so be sure to greet people gently, okay?”

Hey, that’s actually good advice.

Now that I thought about it, Laika was a dragon who’d gone through a lot of martial arts-type training, so her voice would sometimes take on more power when she was enthusiastic about something.

“I am sorry... I will be more careful next time...Little Master Falfa.”

Little Master Falfa still sounded weird...

“All part of the learning process! Okay, now Falfa will give an example~ Ahem.” Falfa cleared her throat. “Welcome~ We have edible slimes! They’re the most famous treat from the village of Flatta in the province of Nanterre~ They may look like slimes, but they’re sweet and tasty! Why not try this marvelous experience for yourself~?”

She said it all without tripping over anything...

Laika gasped in admiration. It would be one thing if she worked at a store every day doing that, but she didn’t have that kind of practice. This was Falfa’s hidden talent.

“All right, now you go, Big Sis Laika.”

“Yes, I shall try.”

From my perspective, Laika’s sales pitch was pretty solid, but—

“Very good! But your face was so tense! Falfa thinks it’d be much better if you relax a little!” Falfa was smiling, but she was not pulling her punches. This was like a full-blown training seminar. “Imagine the slimes in your head and put the cuteness in your voice. Think bouncy!”

That sure was a unique request! Maybe that was something only a slime spirit like Falfa could know...

“Think bouncy... I see...” Laika gave it her best shot, but this was tough for her.

The question of slime-consciousness aside, she was still most definitely a little too on edge. Stiff.

Customer service was a real attentive job... A serious, hardworking kid like Laika would get mentally worn out.

On the other hand, Falfa seemed to be playing the role of a store clerk—and only for a short time. For her, this was basically an extension of playing store, so of course she enjoyed it.

Hrrm, customer service sure went deep.

As I watched them practice, the time for breakfast steadily approached, until they briefly put everything on hold to eat.

Afterward, Falfa continued to fervently (?) guide Laika.

“Now let’s practice handing out a sample box when a customer comes in. Say, ‘Please try one~!’ High enough that there’s no sense of pressure.”

Wow, this is some in-depth practice...

“P-please try one...? Was that okay, Little Master Falfa?”

Shalsha had joined in now, but she basically just stood on the sidelines watching with her arms crossed. She reminded me of a coach. “Shalsha has a question, although I’m an amateur in this field.” Shalsha raised her hand. “You almost seem to think customers might be afraid that trying a sample will compel them to buy something. Shalsha wants you to express that just trying the sample is fine.”

That was a difficult ask. I knew what she was trying to say, though.

“Hey, how about we put the sample box nearby, but make it so the customers can try them without the staff seeing? That way there’s no pressure.” I gave the suggestion based off memories from my past life.

In big souvenir displays, there would be several sample boxes, and anyone could have a taste without much resistance.

But then it was kind of unclear as to whether they would actually buy it... The souvenir sweets were meant to be more of a memory of a trip, not a snack for the taste...

Falfa and Shalsha looked at me.

What? Are they going to tell me my idea wasn't spicy enough?

"That's a good idea! You're so smart, Mommy!"

"A fascinating insight. You're even taking sight lines into account."

Hey, they approved! Momma was pleased about that.

"Then we'll have to put the sample box in just the right spot. And we'll have to test it."

"You do it, Shalsha. You're a lot more shy than Falfa is, so if you find a spot that you don't mind, then that should be good for everybody."

My daughters were so enthusiastic about it, it warmed my heart.

But there was something I still couldn't get over.

We were selling sweets, but how they tasted never actually came up...

The most important thing when it came to selling confectionery wasn't how to make it taste any better but how to improve customer service and the displays. The reason Falfa thought we had a chance was because we had Laika with us.

Marketing over taste—it was glaringly obvious to me now.

Well, people only started paying attention to them because we put the eyes on them for the slime angle... Developing a product was hard.

On that point, I genuinely respected Halkara and her factory. I could never run a business.

By the way, Halkara had been planning on eating her portion of the gift that Beelzebub brought along that night, but she ended up drinking again and had to put it off to the morning after...



Finally, the day of the fair came.

One of the plazas in the royal capital served as the venue, and it was lined with several temporary booths like many of the fairs I'd seen in Japan.

And we saw a big ballot box sitting at where the fair HQ would be.

When a customer bought a product, they would be given a ballot with the name of the store on it. Once they decided which store had the best wares, they'd put the ballot for that store into the box.

Also, the numbers would get thrown all out of proportion if fake customers bought a bunch of stuff from the same store, so there were apparently lots of security officers roaming around in plainclothes. Apparently, they worked in secret for the kingdom.

This event was so low-key; did they need so many? Maybe the country was so peaceful that they didn't have anything better to do...

We started setting up at our booth, and we were done way earlier than everyone else. I had expected as much.

"Things really get done quickly with you around, Laika."

"I do not consider myself especially skilled at this kind of work, but...I suppose I know a bit more about it than the other booths."

Dragons had a lot going for them, of course, and Laika had built me a whole house before. Setting up a temporary booth was over in the blink of an eye.

We also had a sign that said:

We had made this back when we first turned edible slimes into a product. Afterward, Halkara had hired sales staff and let them use it.

**Magnificent
Flavor
Revitalizing
and Nourishing**

Carefully produced
by the Witch of
the Highlands

**EDIBLE
SLIMES**



The ones who came to the fair were me, the twins, Laika, and Halkara. Our elven entrepreneur was like a supervisor who'd been selling the edible slimes for a long time, so of course she came along.

Sandra and Rosalie couldn't eat, so they weren't interested. They stayed home. Flatorte had given this one a pass, too, complaining that everything on offer was too small.

If one booth served enough sweets to fill up a dragon in one go, then normal people wouldn't be able to enjoy the fair...

Beelzebub had work, so she wasn't coming. I think the last time she came over, she'd said they were holding their own event, and preparing for that was way too much work.

The other booths were still setting up. Obviously, there were no customers yet.

"Let's go take a look at the competition, Shalsha!" Falfa tugged on her sister's hand.

"Understood. Knowing one's enemy will lead to a greater understanding of the self. Only by observing others can we truly observe ourselves. Is the self not simply a reflection of others? Where does the true self exist?"

"When were we talking about philosophy, Shalsha? Don't worry about that now! Let's go take a look around!"

The girls were full of enthusiasm, so they went off to who knows where.

"Why are they so into this...?"

"Oh, you know, Madam Teacher. Children love sweets, don't they? That's it~"

"I'd accept that answer if they were normal kids, but this is kind of an exception, isn't it?"

"When one lives a long time, you do entertain the idea of running a business! I was like that."

"I've never thought that, so I can't really agree."

"If I run the business, then I can never be scolded for my lateness. No

unreasonable bosses, either... Hee-hee-hee..." Halkara's expression was getting very dark!

"You used to work at a different company a long time ago, right, Halkara? I bet that was a rough time..."

I knew the pain very well, as one who had died from overwork.

"I did... Please, could you pat my head...?"

Well, that was a bit shameless of her, but it wasn't like it would cause any harm. I acquiesced.

"O, please make my boobs as big as Halkara's...", I joked.

"Madam Teacher, you know I'm not a statue that grants wishes if you pat my head?"

While Halkara and I were doing our own thing, Laika stood alone with a nervous look.

"Good customer service... Long-lasting customer service... Customer service that brings people together...", she was muttering to herself...

In my opinion, she was thinking too much about hospitality, which was stressing her out even more.

"Yes, I have perfectly mastered the art of customer service. All that is left for me is to handle the fair. I can do this, I can do this."

Meanwhile, anxiety was written all over her face. I honestly didn't think I'd ever seen her this nervous before.

It's hard work, jumping into something new. If it was too much for her, then we'd have to pull her out even if the girls were disappointed.

But letting her quit because she wasn't used to this job would give us a lot less to work with... I guess we'd just have her work at her own pace for now.

In the meantime, I was setting up the steamer that we would use to make sure the buns were freshly hot. I had Falfa prepare a lot more than we could possibly need, since we'd be shooting ourselves in the foot if we sold out.

Worst-case scenario, we'd bring the extras home and Flatorte would eat the

rest. She has the appetite of a high schooler right after sports club, after all.



“Well then, I guess all we have to do now is wait until the venue opens. We have time, so let’s relax.”

That was when my daughters came back.

“Mommy! Miss Eno, Witch of the Grotto, is participating, too!”

“What? I didn’t think Eno of all people would show up!”

Does she even bake? I thought she specialized in medicine.

The one who reacted to that name the strongest was Halkara. Negatively, of course.

“That hussy! She has learned naught, yet she dares to show her face before me?! I shall teach her a good lesson she shan’t forget!”

“Halkara, you’re speaking funny!”

Why did she sound like she’d stepped out of a period drama? And as the villain besides?

“I’m sorry, when I hear a business rival is nearby, I just...”

Even the normally generous (or at least absentmindedly nice) Halkara couldn’t keep still when the subject of a competing store came up.

“Madam Teacher, since we have time, can we go and see what that...that *woman* is selling?”

I suspect she wasn’t planning to call Eno a woman at first.

“Sure. She’s here, so we should at least go say hello.”

“No need. I am just very curious to see what she’s scheming.”

Yeah, we’ll at least say hello to her.

“I’m certain that with you around, Madam Teacher, she will let her guard down.”

“Don’t use me.”

It’d still been a while since we last saw Eno, so I wanted to see her. And I was curious what kind of sweets a medicinal specialist would be selling. Thus, we made our way to Eno’s booth.

“Is it this booth? The Grotto?”

“Uhh, guess it’s this way.”

The big sign read, SUGAR + MEDICINE = A MIRACULOUS COMBO. Grottos and medicine—this was definitely her.

We found her just setting up. She wasn’t making her goods on the spot, either. That was easier to do with fewer people.

“Oh, if it isn’t Miss Azusa! And—the infamous Halkara Pharmaceuticals! How brave of you to show yourself in broad daylight! You will not get away now that I have you! I shall end you before you can end me!”

“You’ve changed up your character, too!”

Why was everyone speaking so old-fashioned? Were period dramas in right now or something?

“Hey, Eno. I didn’t think we’d see you here. I see you’ve got some sweets, too. I guess baking and medicine-making can be kinda similar, huh?”

Some people said baking was a lot like chemistry. Like how you have to be very careful with the amounts of certain powders.

Witches had to be very careful about measuring their medicine, so that was another parallel.

“Exactly. I decided to create a new product just for the sweets fair!”

Eno then handed her entry to us.

It looked like a puffy baked something or other, but—

It was dark green.

“This is my own invention, the herbal cake! I came up with it! It contains sixteen types of natural remedies, which will leave your body healthy and your taste buds happy!”

Halkara took a look at the cake. Then—

“Pfft.” She snorted.

“Hey! You are making fun of me, aren’t you?! What are you trying to do?!”

“I’m glad to see this, Madam Teacher. We have one less rival. No one will buy this.”

“Do not ignore me! Miss Azusa, this elf is wicked! Do not let her trick you!”

Not a huge fan of being caught in the middle here...

Having two friends fighting each other ranked pretty high in the list of most annoying times in life. Still, I could see what Halkara was trying to say.

“Could you have done something about the color, Eno? This doesn’t exactly make me want to try it...”

Its appearance alone proudly told everyone how bad it was. Green was a color for vegetables; confections had to *look* sweet, too. This did not.

“What?! You, too, Miss Azusa?! A-all right then, give it a try! It is very good! The proof of the cake is in the eating!”

I couldn’t say no after she offered. We couldn’t keep insulting it without trying it, either.

Halkara and I took a bite of the herbal cake at the same time.

If she was selling these, it couldn’t be *too* nasty, flavor-wise—

“Hurk... This...is *bad!*” I covered my mouth with my hand. That was a shock to the system...

“Urrrgh... I feel like I’m going to vomit, and I’m not even drunk!” Halkara’s reaction wasn’t an act, at least not as far as I could tell.

“No! I made it sweet! It’s technically cake!”

“That isn’t how this works! You cannot just throw in some sweetener to offset the bitter herbs and call it cake; that only makes it more horrible! It’s like adding sugar to medicine for children; it tastes worse than the bitter stuff!” Halkara the apothecary was, of course, right on the money.

“Yeah... This was a failure. No one can eat this.”

“Oh no... B-but it’s good for you! I said it was healthy, and it is!”

“Uh-huh.” Halkara snorted again.

I had no idea she could get so condescending when it came to her business rival...

“This is a sweets event, you know. The most important thing here is the flavor. So if we take that argument to its logical conclusion, then your entry needs to taste good, no matter its effects on your health. The second you decided to prioritize other factors was when you made your first mistake. You are a cake amateur. Go home!”

Halkara was taking no prisoners. A little extreme but generally correct.

Eno was in shock. I could see it on her face—she knew she’d lost this round.

“Indeed... Sweets that do not taste good contradict the very essence of their nature... I treated cakes as mere child’s play, but I can’t even bring children joy with my own line of thought...”

Well, she could meditate on her mistakes all she wanted, but the event hadn’t even started yet. Wasn’t it a little too early for her to start acting like that...?

“I was chasing two rabbits, but I caught neither. My cake is the result of this folly. Baked treats may be indulgent, but the baking world is not.”

Halkara wore a smug look on her face, but she wasn’t a baking pro herself, either. The words of an amateur really didn’t have a lot of power.

After thoroughly crushing Eno, we couldn’t exactly have a casual chat with her, so we decided to take a look at the other booths.

“Wow, there are booths from all over the country here. So many types of sweets~”

“Look at those colorful candies. Everyone’s so creative.”

Pickled bake, kottac candy, sugar beans, spirit pudding... I spotted all kinds of names I’d never heard of before.

I was starting to think that taking first place out of all these was going to be much harder than Falfa and Shalsha thought.

“Madam Teacher, I believe edible slimes have great potential, but it isn’t as well-known as some of these other sweets. If there is one hurdle we will have to clear, that is it.”

“I mean, we have no real tradition to draw from, either... It’s not going to be easy being a newcomer.”

It was safer for people to buy what they knew.

Of course, some adventurous types will buy something new just because it’s unfamiliar, but they aren’t the majority.

“Our key to victory does indeed hinge on Miss Laika’s cuteness.”

“This really isn’t about the sweets anymore, is it...? Well, I guess we should be heading back now.” It was too early to buy anything.

“Oh, Madam Teacher, could you make me an edible slime when we get back?”

“I’ll be making them to sell—and you know you can’t vote for me even if you buy one, right? That’s against the rules.”

Halkara shook her head, her face pale. “No, I want it to refresh my palate. The bitterness from that herb cake is coating my whole mouth... It has one of those strangely persistent aftertastes...”

Eno’s herb cake successfully dealt damage to Halkara!

“Damn you, Witch of the Grotto... You are causing me pain with your failure of a cake... I shall carry this grudge for a thousand years!”

“I’m pretty sure it was just a coincidence!”

And why did she take on that old-fashioned cadence again?

I doubted Halkara and Eno’s relationship would mend anytime soon.



Finally, the time came for the sweets fair to open.

The general admission gate opened, and all the guests came flooding into the venue.

“Wow, there are so many people! I suppose it is in the royal capital, after all~” Halkara placed her hand above her eyes to shield them as she gazed out into the distance.

“Yeah. Not really a sight we get to see where we live.”

If someone saw this without context, they'd probably think it was a riot or war.

"We'll get so many customers! Falfa's so happy!"

"The teeming masses have arrived, guided not by their own wills."

"Hey, Shalsha? Let's not call our customers 'the masses,' okay? I think we'd get in trouble for that..."

Of course, the sheer number of people was having a negative effect on someone else—Laika.

"I did not think this many people would come... Stay calm, stay calm..."

If she had to tell herself to stay calm, then she wasn't calm. This level of self-consciousness was the definition of *not calm*.

"Are you okay, Laika? You look a little green. You can always throw in the towel if it's too much, okay?"

As her instructor, I didn't want to force her to do anything she didn't want to do.

"I—I am fine! I am simply unused to this environment! But that is far from an excuse on the battlefield."

I guess it was okay if she was just surprised by how many people were here. Really, it was a bit odd to see a dragon so shocked by a large crowd.

Shalsha patted Laika on the shoulder.

"You need not worry. Think of the tiger within your own heart."

"Thank you, Shalsha!"

Uh, whatever works... Is it normal here for dragons to have "tigers in their hearts"?

Meanwhile, the guests started approaching our booth.

The first ones to come by were a pair of women in their twenties.

"Hey, edible slimes!"

"What a funny idea."

Here we go! Let's nab some customers.

"Edible slimes are super good! These are the only slimes you can eat in the entire world~!"

"Your life will not be complete until you've tried them. Please have a taste."

The twins advertised first.

"Awww, twin girls!"

"They're so cute~!"

Right, right? Aren't my daughters just adorable?

To be honest, I was way happier than if I'd gotten a compliment myself. Just part of being a mom, huh?

Now the problem was Laika—

"H-helcome..."

She tripped over herself! Stumbled out of the starting gate!

Oh no, I was right; this wouldn't work... She was nowhere near calm.

Laika hung her head. She was probably feeling the same way I was.

But surprisingly—when she lifted her head, she looked incredibly calm.

All the nerves and anxiety seemed to vanish.

"Why not try an edible slime? I believe this will be an entirely new flavor for you. They are filled with sweetened boiled beans. You may also take a sample, so please, try one."

Incredible! Her nervousness must have reached a limit and flipped the switch instead.

"Here you go, ma'am and ma'am. These are our sample edible slimes." She held out a plate of one *manju* cut up into quarters to the two girls.

"Wow, this dragon-girl is super sweet... And those clothes look so good on her..."

"She's more, like, handsome than cute... She's like a prince."

And she'd charmed the customers!

"Okay, I'll buy ten."

"I'll take twenty."

Right off the bat, we'd sold two and a half dozen. This was the Laika Effect!

"Thank you. Please enjoy the rest of your day at the event."

Laika saw the customers off with the smile of a distinguished butler.

Now that I thought about it, I'm pretty sure Laika was once in a position like this at a red-dragon school. She should be the perfect image of a prim young lady. Maybe memories of the younger students fawning over her came back to her.

"Big Sis Laika, you were super cute!"

"A true femme fatale. Both castle and kingdom would bow to you."

Both of my daughters were giving her their stamp of approval, while another one of us was acting oddly.

"I could go with Laika..." Halkara was enraptured.

"Go with' how? What does that mean?"

"Oh, Madam Teacher, how uncouth can you be~?"

"No, wait, hold on! I just need to know what you're talking about!"

"Isn't it so romantic to let a late bloomer like Miss Laika take her turn for the attack?"

"What on earth are you talking about?!"

We continued to sell our edible slimes as we kept a cautious eye on Halkara.

To be honest, it was selling well. This was basically just a festival, and that mood was working in our favor. The strings on the customers' wallets were loose for the occasion.

Obviously, no one would come out to a sweets fair and then not buy any sweets. We had a concentrated pool of people interested in confectionary. And our flavors were going over extremely well.

“I’ve never had something like this before!”

“I’ve never seen this in my life, but it’s good!”

People would buy a portion and eat it immediately nearby, and sometimes I could overhear their opinions.

I was never nervous about the taste. It wouldn’t have gotten the reputation it did in Flatta or Nascúte if it was bad. But taking number one was a different story. There were plenty of other booths that were even more popular than we were.

I also got a clear view of the line forming at our booth. That was enough to tell us that we were doing well.

It wasn’t that we were bad—it was just that there were other places that were even more amazing, and they deserved it.

“Everyone’s offering the staples from their region, huh. They’ve got ‘white chocolate friends’ over there. And those are ‘peep cookies.’ And ‘bear sherbet.’”

“Those are all the famous, classic treats from those regions. And when they all gather in one place, the teeming masses have no choice but to come and line up.”

There Shalsha went again, calling people *the masses*...

“Then people who see the lines wonder what the lines are for and come to join the queue despite their ignorance.”

She sounded like a lamenting sage, but I knew what she was trying to say.

Once a line formed, it was hard to resist the urge to hop in. And any familiar goods had a natural advantage. Not that that’s much of a surprise.

“Well, there’s not much we can do. We’re practically unknown here in the capital, but we’re still putting up a good fight.”

We didn’t have to take first; Laika was overcoming a weakness of hers anyway as she was steadily dealing with our customers.

But then, it happened.

“Helcome...Ah.”

She tripped over her words for the second time today. These kinds of mistakes always happened right when you were getting used to things.

Laika wouldn't fall into a panic over something like this—would she?

Her face immediately went bright red.

“M-my pololgies! Oh no, I messed up again...”

If the first error flipped the switch that set her free—then the second flipped the switch that brought her nerves back!

“I'm losing my composure... Um... Well, if it's all right...it would make me very happy if you were to buy these...” Laika placed her hand to her mouth, her face still bright red.

She'd tripped over her words in front of others, so of course she was embarrassed.

But there were people out there in the world who found value in her bashfulness.

“Isn't she adorable?!”

“Her adorableness is on an entirely new dimension.”

“She's the most precious here in this whole square!”

I could hear the opinions of the crowd, and Laika's embarrassment was only fanning the flames.

Everyone had discovered how cute she was the second she got flustered.

“Um... Is there something on my face...? I get nervous if you look at me too much... I do not mind when I am fighting in dragon form, however, but... Please do not call me cute; I...I am not cute a-a-at all!”

All the people calling her cute only flustered her even more.

As she squirmed, the crowd around her was visibly swelling.

It was like when regular people realized a huge pop star had tried to sneak into an event.

“Hey, isn’t that Laika, Jewel of the Highlands?!”

“I had no idea she’d be here as a booth girl!”

“She’s right there!! I want a glimpse of her, at least!”

Apparently, there was a small subsection of people here in the royal capital who already knew her name. The power of a rumor...

A few moments later, the crowd started to take the shape of a line.

I was surprised at how quickly they formed the queue, like they were all going through a drill, when I saw Halkara pushing them into shape.

“This is the line for edible slimes~ Edible slimes~ One for seventy gold! Please have your money ready when you get in line~ We take payments in two spots, so please form two lines!”

So efficient. She’d been in sales for a long time.

“Oh, sir, could you please stick to the side as best you can? Do not block the ways to other booths, please!”

And she was conscious of the smallest details, too...

Meanwhile, at the front of the line, Falfa and Shalsha were handling the customers as salespeople.

“Thank you~ They’re really tasty!”

“We thank you for your purchase. I pray that your discovery of these sweets will lead to your happiness.”

The two were hard at work. Shalsha was getting a lot better at dealing with the customers.

“Um... Lady Azusa? What happened...? I don’t quite understand...,” Laika asked me with a perplexed look.

“The people of the capital have spoken, and they say you are adorable.”

A beautiful, blushing girl was a force to be reckoned with.

And just like a well-known snack...a well-known girl had immense crowd-gathering power.

Laika essentially functioned as a giant ad now.

“No... I was simply embarrassed because I’d made a mistake... They don’t need to concentrate on me like that... Ooh...I wish I could hide in a volcano...”

Nobody would be able to follow you in there, that’s for sure.

“By the way, Laika, we get more customers when you’re not acting dignified.”

When people came, Laika got more embarrassed. And when Laika got embarrassed, more people came. A perpetual-motion machine.

“Is it true that Bashful Laika’s here?”

“Yes! I really wanted to see Bashful Laika!”

It sounded like a nickname... Who came up with it...?

Blushing bright red—

“Please try one.”

—Laika extended the sample plate out to the people around her.

I was happy enough lightly encouraging her from the sidelines.

Her bashfulness was reasonable; it didn’t seem totally out of nowhere.

And once a line formed, the line summoned more people. We got a good cycle started at our booth.

“Oh no, Mommy! We had so many slimes prepared, but now they’re almost gone!”

“What? No way we’re almost sold out...”

Sure enough, our reserves were practically empty.

“No need to worry,” Shalsha said, arms folded. “We prepared enough that selling out would most certainly mean victory. The path will open to us so long as we continue to sell.” Shalsha was starting to remind me of a stubborn artisan.

In the end, our edible slimes sold out before the event was over.

Once our wares were gone, Laika looked considerably relieved, like a ghost who’d been haunting her was finally gone.

“I still have much room for improvement; I’ve learned that losing my composure is a bad tendency I have from this event. I have much more to learn.”

“I think it’s fantastic that you found the desire to improve from that.”

I bet that was the secret ingredient to her popularity.

“I am all right in front of people, but the moment they tell me I’m cute, I cannot handle it. I must learn not to let that bother me.”

Now that she mentioned it, being told she was cute weakened her way more than just customer service.

“But that’s ’cause you *are* cute, Laika. People are gonna say it.”

“Lady Azusa, please do not say that, not even as a joke.”

But I wasn’t joking...

We were all sold out of slimes, but it was still too early to pack up and go home. At the end of the fair, they were going to reveal the winners of the popularity vote.

They started calling the winners from third place.

We didn’t hear our name for either third or second place, and for a moment, I wondered if maybe, just maybe— **“And the honor of first place goes to the edible slimes!!”**

And the MC called *our* name!

Everyone who hadn’t gone home yet sent up a cheer.

Falfa and Shalsha high-fived each other.

Wow, I had no idea we’d be taking first place...

“Not only did you offer wonderful customer service, your unique recipe of sweet bean paste set it apart from the competition and earned you a fantastic reputation! With advertising effectiveness and originality, you took first by a mile! Congratulations!”

It’d be cruel to make Laika go get the trophy here, huh?

“Go on, Falfa, Shalsha.”

“Okey dokey!”

“Understood.”

The two lifted the heavy trophy together, and the audience applauded and cheered.

“They’re so cute~!”

“The kids are adorable, too!”

“They’re so smart!”

I’m pretty sure this was all because of Laika, but I was glad we got first place.

“Edible slimes are now a national phenomenon. I’ll have to open quite a number of stores now~ Heh-heh-heh~”

The plans were running at high speed in Halkara’s head.

“Open as many stores as you like, but please don’t advertise that the Witch of the Highlands made them...”

“Of course. I will stand a good enough chance if I advertise Miss Laika’s name instead!”

“Stop! That’s worse!”

Think of what it would do to Laika!

In case you were wondering, nobody bought Eno’s cake. To no one’s surprise.

Strictly speaking, a few people did buy it out of curiosity, but she got no votes at all for such a bad-tasting product. Only the smallest subsection of the people with the weirdest taste would like that flavor.

“I will get my revenge for this one day... All of my things are so heavy... It was a mistake to come here alone...” Eno came by to say hello at the very end, then she loaded her entire booth setup onto a cart and left.

I guess these things happened when you ran a business...

“If there are winners, then there must necessarily be losers. Conflict is so cruel.” Beside me, Shalsha stood with her arms folded as she nodded deeply.

“That’s a heavy comment to end a sweets fair on, don’t you think?”

“Such is competition, Mom.”

Baked goods may be indulgent, but the baking world is not.

And there was one thing that was still on my mind—or at least that started weighing on my mind right as we were leaving.

“Hey, Laika? You said you were interested in edible slimes. What did that mean?” I was pretty sure she’d said something to that effect.

“Ah, yes, yes. I thought of a new way to bring the edible slimes to their maximum potential.”

“You did?”

Did that mean Laika was interested in business now? If so, that was unusual.

“Lady Azusa, why not spend a day at my hometown, Mount Rokko, next time? I can tell you the details then.”

“Sure, I’d be glad to go.”

Laika had worked hard today, so I could definitely take up a simple request like that.

Ahhh, Mount Rokko. May as well hit up the hot springs while I’m there. I know they have great hot springs.

Wait, hot springs?

And manju?

Wait a second...



A few days later, I hopped on dragon Laika’s back, and we headed for Mount Rokko.

I got to see Laika’s older sister Leila and her parents for the first time in a long while, and it was all in all a peaceful time.

“Boy, this is nothing like the blue dragon village...”

When red dragons lived in their human forms, it really felt like an upper-class

human society. Even the furniture was all high quality.

“Ah-ha-ha, that is because blue dragons are nothing more than what they are. Even the most useless dragons can still survive. That is how you get those types.”

Laika’s dad acted relaxed, like he had a lot of money, but “dragons can still survive even if they are useless” was a perfectly apt phrase. Dragons had such high potential that they could afford not to make the most of it.

Laika and her sister were having a fun chat, but Laika herself seemed a bit uncomfortable with all the teasing.

“Laika, I know you’re training to get stronger, which is great, but what about love?”

“That hardly matters! Please do not ask about this...”

“You are hopeless when it comes to this topic. You have so many weaknesses.”

Yep, she knew her little sister well.

“Miss Azusa, I know Laika is in your capable hands.”

“Yes, don’t worry. I’m taking very good care of her!”

“Please don’t let my sister rope you into this, Lady Azusa!”

Despite being a powerful dragon, Laika was still the cute little sister at home.

“Um, Lady Azusa,” Laika said, “I think it’s about time we do the experiment with the edible slimes.”

“Oh yeah, that’s why we were here!”

Our chat with her family took longer than I thought it would.

“I was wondering if we would be able to use the steam from Mount Rokko. I believe heating the edible slimes in the steam will give it flavor like no one has ever had before!”

“...Yeah. This is exactly what I expected.”

She was trying to have us make *onsen manju*—*manju* steamed in the waters

of hot springs. Even in another world, people could see that they were a match made in heaven.

“Incredible, Lady Azusa! Such powers of insight!”

Ooh, her look of admiration kind of stung...

I was just making use of the memories from my past life...

We immediately set out to start our plan to turn edible slimes into *onsen manju*. Fortunately, they were selling wooden steamers at the Mount Rokko hot spring village. All red dragons were good with their hands, so there were artisans who made them by hand.

“Mount Rokko has never had any trademark sweets, so I thought we might be able to make one ourselves.”

“Yeah, that’s really good thinking. Here, line up the steamers like this, and we just need to put them over the water.”

“Lady Azusa, you know exactly what I am thinking of. I thought I’d come up with a perfect idea, but now I’m a bit embarrassed...”

“Oh, I’m not inspired or anything. I’m just using the knowledge I’ve gathered over the years... I think it’s amazing that *you* thought this up, okay?”

We placed the steamers, careful not to get scalded, and waited.

I wasn’t sure how long we needed to wait, exactly, but we’d test it several times to find out the perfect timing. We both waited in silence.

“Um, Lady Azusa, I learned a lot during the sweets fair. Well, about my weaknesses anyway,” Laika said as she stared at the steamer.

Now that I thought about it, with all the newcomers to the family, we’d had less and less time to talk one-on-one.

“I wanted to rid myself of all unnecessary thought and aim for greater heights—that is how I’d been training myself thus far, but...when I do that, I grow more brittle...”

This was something only the most hardworking kids worried about. Maybe the real reason she asked me along was so we could talk.

“Until now, I have done my utmost not to think too hard about things, but I suppose now I see that I am not terribly strong emotionally. I was trying to ignore that by aiming straight for one single goal.”

I hugged Laika tightly from behind; I needed to act like a master every once in a while.

“I think you *are* amazing. You came to that answer all by yourself, Laika. I’m so proud you’re my apprentice—my family.”

“I am happy to hear you say that, but I am lacking in so many areas still...”

I didn’t mind her hardworking attitude, but the negativity was a different story.

“Laika, how long has it been since you realized that?”

“What?” Laika’s voice squeaked, probably because she wasn’t expecting my question. “I have only just figured it out. I had been hiding it this whole time...”

“Then take your time overcoming this. Three hundred years ago, I was just a regular, powerless witch, too.”

Yes—I spent three hundred years doing the exact same thing, and that’s what made me who I am today. It didn’t happen overnight. In fact, three centuries is super, super slow.

“If you can take it slow, then you should. Don’t do more than you can handle. Look at the bigger, broader picture. There’s nothing to worry about. That’s my guarantee as your teacher, Laika.”



“All right, Lady Azusa.” I couldn’t see her face, but her voice told me there was no problem here. “I will take things slowly from now on.”

“Good—glad you understand what I’m saying. You’re such a good apprentice. Now let’s see how our *manju* are doing.”

We opened the lid on the steamers and found a row of puffy little slimes.

““Oooh!””

This wasn’t an unusual sight at all, but we still cooed in awe together.

We wasted no time in popping the steaming hot *onsen manju* versions of the edible slimes into our mouths.

“Yes, this is so good! It doesn’t really taste any different than normal, though!”

“Indeed! It’s lovely! ...It does taste largely the same.”

Yeah, all we really did was steam it in some hot springs... It’s not going to taste like curry or anything all of a sudden.

“But...it does have a slightly different charm than regular edible slimes.”

“Yeah. I think it’d taste much better than usual if we ate it in a town with hot springs.”

We looked at each other and giggled, although I couldn’t tell you what exactly was so funny. But these little slime buns made us laugh for no reason, and that was what made them so great.

And I hear they’ll soon be sold as the Mount Rokko edible slimes.



WE MET A STRANGE FORTUNE-TELLER



That day, the family and I went out to Nascúte to do some shopping. We mainly went there to get whatever we couldn't find in the village of Flatta.

"Mmm... It feels so strange to be near my workplace on a day off...", Halkara said, stooping forward slightly.

"Oh, that's right. I guess you can't really relax when your factory's in town, huh? Well, you can chill at a café or something, okay? Nothing says we all have to stay together."

Once in my past life, when I finally had a day off after twenty days straight of work, I ended up going near work and had to tell myself to go shopping somewhere else.

Actually, Flatorte was carrying Sandra off to the market now. Our little mandragora was already tired of walking.

Then, Falfa and Shalsha had hurried off to a bookstore where they would be for the rest of the trip, so they weren't with us. We were all pretty separated.

"Well, no, I can't take strolls around town when I'm working, so I do like to walk around when I'm doing research for a new product."

"Huh. So which is it?"

"It's just that I know I need to study, but I don't want to study—do you know what I mean?"

"I get it. That makes more sense to me."

If studying was so unbelievably fun to do, then no one would ever relax and enjoy themselves. If people found themselves avoiding the task, then that meant they found more pain than pleasure in it.

“Ah, that’s right. I heard from one of my employees that there’s a strange booth that appeared in town. I believe it was between two buildings like this nearby.”

“What? Between buildings?”

A booth could be anywhere, but why in a tiny alley?

“You sure they’re not selling creepy items or anything? I’m not really looking forward to being arrested for accidentally buying something on the black market.”

“If it seems too dubious, we’ll pretend we didn’t see anything. It’s all right, it’s all right!”

“Halkara, you really like making yourself sound completely untrustworthy, don’t you...?”

There was no proof that this wouldn’t go horribly wrong.

Then, Laika pointed down an alleyway.

“Oh, could that be it?”

Sure enough, sitting between the buildings was a square table and some chairs, with a sign next to the table saying exactly what services they were offering.

“I see~ A booth doesn’t take up all that much space, so setting up shop in the open isn’t too strange. But it’s still”—I cleared my throat—“very suspicious!”

“Do you think so, Madam Teacher? I find it hard to believe fortunes, you know~ What is the moon’s power anyway?”

“No, Halkara, I’m not talking about fortune-telling in general. I’m saying that this booth specifically is fishy!”

What “media” were they talking about? I’m pretty sure there wasn’t much in the way of media around here.

Plus, people in this world had a real tendency to come up with really sketchy-sounding advertisements. It was so exaggerated...or everything was just embellished. There was no appreciation for the art of minimalism.



Anyway, I wondered what kind of person was running the booth.

The apparent fortune-teller wore a robe with a hood pulled down over their eyes. They certainly had the vibe, but I didn't know much about the typical dress for this trade in this world. Maybe this was unusual.

—Then, they looked at us. Or I assumed they did—their eyes were still hidden behind the hood—but I knew they'd noticed us.

Oh no, now we've got their attention... It'd be hard to say no if we got called over...

But luckily—if you could say that—a customer happened to be sitting at the booth already.

Phew. We weren't going to be pulled aside.

And the customer was none other than...Flatta guild employee Natalie!

"Why is Natalie here?!"

"This is perfect, Lady Azusa. We can see what sort of fortunes this fortune-teller tells."

“O-okay... I’m not a fan of voyeurism, but if it’s just a fortune...”

Natalie once leaked the fact that I was max level, which was technically personal info... So this would make us even in a way.

“Welcome. What would you like to know?”

The fortune-teller’s voice told us that it was a woman. The profession definitely seemed to skew female, in my experience.

“Well, my luck in marriage, of course!”

Natalie always had marriage on the mind...

“I would love if you could tell me how I can find myself a wonderful—”

“I don’t really need to do any divination because to be honest, you have no hope.”

That was *too* honest!

“What?! What an awful thing to say! You haven’t even tried! I will pay you, so please, do it properly!”

We were shocked, too—she wasn’t even going to bother with the fortune-telling?

“Ha-ha~,” said Halkara. “Some fortune-tellers take on a condescending persona and say whatever they want~ I suppose this is that kind of booth~”

Halkara sure knew a lot, being a businesswoman herself...

Now then, how was the fortune-teller going to handle this?

“Listen. If you can’t find a partner to marry, that means there’s a problem with your work environment or living environment. I mean, you work in a place with a small population and limited customer base, right?”

“Omigosh! You’re right!”

“Then, obviously, you’re not meeting anyone. You have no choice but to move to a place where you’ll find more people, and if you still can’t manage it even after changing the basics in your life, then you’ll have to ask for introductions. And if you don’t do any of that, then you’re just relying on me instead of looking to the real problem.”

Natalie nodded vigorously.

The fortune-teller had won total faith from her customer.

“And if I told you that your ‘the one’ is in blah-blah town of so-and-so province in this country, so you should take off work and go right now, you wouldn’t just believe me and set out right away, would you?”

“No... To be honest, it’s more important to have a stable job...”

“If I went that far, then I’d be telling your future, not just your fortune. See? I didn’t actually have to do any divination for you. I don’t need your money.”

“Oh, no, no, you gave me plenty of advice, so I must pay you!”

“Oh, you will? Two thousand gold, then.”

As Natalie went home, I could hear her muttering, “Maybe I should ask the guild to hold a mixer... Or maybe I should just send a request to the guild that I’m looking for someone to marry...”

Mmm, that second option might attract some real weirdos, so maybe better not with that...

“We did not get to see her craft in action, Madam Teacher.” Halkara seemed a little disappointed.

“Well, she seems a lot more put together than I originally thought. I’m not sure if this strictly counts as fortune-telling, though.”

Meanwhile, another customer came to sit in the chair. Business sure was booming.

And it was another familiar face, a girl wearing a whole lot of white, which meant— “Now it’s Wynona! My stepdaughter...”

Why are all her customers people I know?

“Welcome. What fortune would you like told today?”

“I’m an adventurer, so I want you to tell me which region I should be going to next. I do not mind vague directions, either.”

I see, I see. A very adventurer-type question.

“Understood. Now I will use the power of the moon to tell your fortune.”

Finally, we’d get to see what methods she used.

“First show me your right hand. I will need to check the lines of your palm.”

What?! Palm reading?!

The fortune-teller looked down at Wynona’s palm. “Oh, ma’am, your hands...”

“What? Are they remarkable in some way?”

“They’re so doughy.”

What the hell? I thought as I watched.

“You think? I don’t pay much attention to my skin; I’m an adventurer, after all.” But Wynona seemed a bit happy about having soft hands anyway.

“They’re like a slime.”

Well, she is a slime spirit...

This fortune-teller was generally on the right track, but there was nothing she’d done so far that looked like actual divination.

“This line tells us that you toiled in your youth, but that hardship has paid off. You must be well-off now, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I live in a large mansion.”

Hey! She was right!

“Well, it could go either way at this point~ Anyone with a bit of skill and charisma could probably do this.” Halkara was taking the cynical approach. For how interested she was before, she seemed to be a skeptic of divination in general. Maybe she was just curious to see how this all worked from the business side of things. The management perspective.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Laika was watching intently with great interest.

I guess at her age, fortune-telling was the thing to think about. Wait, maybe age didn’t matter. Middle-aged women liked to do this stuff, too.

“So where should I go? Or not go?”

“I need to use the moon’s power for that, so I must muster my energy.” The fortune-teller then flung off her robe.

I was right; it was a woman. Her hair was rather long, and both her hair and eyes were blue. This was probably a part of her act, but there was an awe-inspiring aura around her.

“Look into my eyes, as I will look into yours. Receive the moon’s power, and you will see the path you are to take.”

Ooh, it’s about to get real!

“Very well. Please look into my future.” Wynona gave her approval.

“Good. I will now begin an incantation that will amplify the moon’s power.”

Ooh, what kind of incantation?

I was excited to get a glimpse of unfamiliar magic.

**“Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon 🎵 Lunaluna~ Moomoonmoon 🎵
The full moon, the half-moon, the crescent, all kinds of moons~
🎵”**

What a stupid incantation!

Suddenly, her aura was more fishy than inspiring... *Why does this feel like a variety show...?*

“Pff... Pfft...”

Wynona couldn’t help laughing. Anyone would, really.

“No, no, that won’t do. Laughing will obscure the vision of your path,” the fortune-teller warned her with utter seriousness. She wasn’t seeing the humor here.

“Oh, your song is just so...unique...and distinct...”

I think *stupid* was the word she was trying to avoid.

“This is the most effective way to gain the moon’s power. I sing it thrice every morning.”

“Pfft... Three times...?”

She was laughing again!

“I will do it again. And sing the last part together with me. I’ll give you separate instruction for that, all right?”

“What? I have to sing that stupid song with you?”

Whoops, and the truth comes out!

“Stupid? What?! This is the best way to gain the moon’s power!” The fortune-teller was a stickler for specific things.

“Madam Teacher, the more serious the fortune-teller acts, the funnier she seems. *Pffft...*” Halkara was treating this whole thing like a comedy show now.

“She was serious at the beginning, but then all the jokes just came rushing out at once. Do people usually tell fortunes like this?”

“Of course not.”

“That’s what I thought...”

As we chatted, the song started again.

**“Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmoon ♪
The full moon, the half-moon, the crescent, all kinds of moons~
♪ But the moon stays perfectly round all the time~ ♪ How strange
is that~ ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon ♪ Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ♪”**

“*Pffft!* That last part with the moonmoonmoomoonmoon...” Wynona was laughing again... Maybe she had an extra ticklish funny bone.

“Ahhh, I told you that you can’t laugh. You won’t be able to see the future.”

And the fortune-teller was still completely serious about all of it...

“Sorry, I was just thinking about how unique your sensibilities are...”

She’d already said it was stupid out loud, so she didn’t need to be nice about it anymore.

At that moment, Halkara leaned over and whispered to me,

“Moonmoonmoomoonmoon!”

“Bah-ha! Halkara, you coward! You can’t take me by surprise like that!”

Dammit! She was hooked on the joke now!

I pressed my hand hard against my mouth.

Laika was chuckling, too.

“Gosh, I’m so sorry,” said Halkara. “I know this will be going around the factory for a little while. We have such a skilled comedian here today.”

“She’s a fortune-teller. Not a comedian.”

“Oh, I love comedians that sing,” said Laika. “Children can hum along, too.”

“All I’ve learned from you today is that you don’t believe in fortune-telling.”

Even if she did, I doubted she would believe in this fortune-telling...

That song kept going, by the way, but I’m cutting it out.

At the end, the fortune-teller said to Wynona, “Now sing along with me!”

But Wynona burst out laughing. “Lunaluna... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! I scarcely knew song lyrics could be so stupid!”

“Oh, please! Just go home if you’re going to tease me. The moon’s power isn’t something to handle carelessly! There can be serious side effects if you do not stick to the proper dosage and directions of use!”

I was really glad this wasn’t one of those challenges where you got hit with a stick if you laughed.

“Understood. I will not laugh anymore... *Pfft...*”

“You’re laughing, and we haven’t even started yet.”

After that, Wynona sang along with the “Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon 🎵
Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon 🎵 Moonmoonmoomoonmoon 🎵”

“Now, to finish, please repeat the ‘Lunaluna’ part three times.”

“Are you serious about this, Miss Fortune-Teller?”

Wynona was starting to treat all of this as a joke already.

“I am serious. I swear on the moon it is! We’re singing now. Ready, go!”

**““Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon 🎵 Lunaluna~
Moomoonmooooon 🎵 Moonmoonmoomoonmoon 🎵””**

Lord, it was a chorus now...

The fortune song ended in a strange feeling of unity.

“Madam Teacher, the melody has gotten stuck in my head after hearing it so many times. **Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon 🎵**”

“I’m not really sure what to do with that information...”

But this finally meant that we’d see the results.

“Here we go. You are sailing smoothly right now. No matter where your adventure leads you, you will be all right.”

“My result was rather mundane for how much you made me sing...”

Wynona didn’t seem very happy with her reply. She was probably thinking all the singing wasn’t worth it.

“But you must be careful when it comes to forming a party. Your attitude often brings trouble.”

Anyone could tell that after a few seconds with her!

“Laughing at another who is passionate about something will often sour your relationships. Look at things objectively and refrain from offering commentary, even if you think you’re in the right. The other person may see it as an insult.”

She was just complaining that Wynona laughed at her song!

Wynona looked like she wanted to say something else, but she only paid and left.

The song was entirely suspect, but it was still a fact that she successfully told Wynona’s fortune, so I couldn’t call it a scam. This was par for the course for this kind of thing.

But things didn’t end there.

“You there, you’ve been watching this entire time. Interested?”

The fortune-teller spoke to us!

Well, considering how closely we'd been watching, it was a given that she was paying attention to us, too.

"Oh, we don't have any fortune-tellers around where we're from, so we thought it'd be interesting to watch. Ha-ha-ha..."

I didn't really want to get wrapped up in all this, so I gracefully parried her invite.

But Halkara marched right over and plopped in the customer seat. "Please tell me how the company I run now will be going in the future."

After all that mockery, she was raring to go!

"See, Madam Teacher, managers tend to ask about their own futures. I've decided to jump right in by starting with the superficial!"

She didn't have to tell me any of that.

"Don't knock it till you try it. And I'll give you a good and proper fortune if you pay the fee."

She was a real pro, not even breaking her stride. If she'd admitted to joking around, then she wouldn't be a fortune-teller but just a street performer.

And Laika's been concentrating on the fortune-telling this whole time. She had the same expression as the fortune-teller—not in the sense that she was going to bust out in another round of *lunaluna* but more with pure, genuine interest.

"You can have your fortune told afterward, too, Laika."

"What? But...it's two thousand gold for ten minutes..."

"That barely counts as an indulgence. This'll be an important experience, too."

Halkara sang along with the song perfectly. As the one having her fortune told, she had to join in on the last verse (if that's what it was?). It was a big hurdle that appeared to accomplish nothing.

"I see you've memorized the whole thing just by listening... But please don't

sing it carelessly. You should be very careful about using the moon's power, or it could hurt you."



“Understood! I will be careful!”

I doubted Halkara believed it would actually cause her harm, but she probably wouldn't go around singing it anywhere else, either...

“As for your company, well... It's going well, but to be more precise, the gap between you and a rival company is widening. Fortunately, your conflict will settle without coming to blows. You basically just need to keep going as you are.”

“Ooh! I think you're right!”

“Your work is on the right track. I doubt you have any real worries regarding management of your company right now, and so long as you keep steadily moving forward, you shouldn't have any problems.”

I guess that “rival company” she was talking about was Eno. I doubted Halkara Pharmaceuticals was in any kind of imminent danger, so it sounded, all in all, correct.

“My, you did give me a solid fortune~”

“Of course, of course. If you're happy with it, then I'm glad. When the song of the moon guides you, then I benefit as well.” This fortune-teller sure was used to being treated as a joke...

“Actually, there is one more thing I'd like you to tell. Is that okay?” Halkara said, leaning closer.

“As long as you pay... What is it?”

“Please divine what it is that's worrying *you*, Miss Fortune-Teller.”

Both Laika and I stared at her blankly.

To be honest, I had no idea why she wanted to do that.

The fortune-teller seemed just as clueless as us. Her face read, *I sure have a weird customer here today.*

“Well, I could. But could you tell me your motives for this? I can't really tell a fortune if the intentions behind it aren't good. Fortunes are to make people happy. I make it a point not to use it to make people unhappy.”

“Whenever I see a fortune-teller, there’s always one thing that bothers me. Do you tell your own fortunes? If you keep choosing your own path of success, you could have such a fulfilling life outside of work, you know? In my opinion anyway.”

Once she explained herself, I got what she was going for. It was a very Halkara-esque train of thought.

“But I don’t get the impression that fortune-tellers tell their own fortunes very often. And if that really did bring you success after success, then you would expect every legitimate fortune-teller to live in a fancy manor. So I was wondering about that~”

In short, Halkara the realist was trying to step into the backstage of the industry.

Her reasonings could be considered a breach of the rules, so the fortune-teller might say no.

For example, if there’s an employee who works for a company that sells lucky stones that are said to bring in billions of yen, but their salary is only five million yen, then you’d probably want to tell them to just use the stone to make money if it’s so effective.

Or if there’s a publishing company that releases books on how to change your lifestyle to something happier, but the editors all look miserable, then you’d probably want to tell them to practice what’s in their book. Following that logic, it’d be easy to see the inconsistencies in the work.

“I see.” The fortune-teller inhaled, then exhaled, and then replied in a relaxed manner. “First, let me explain the rules. Fortune-tellers often refrain from telling not only their own fortunes, but usually of their friends and family as well. When someone is too close, it becomes harder to give them suitable advice.”

That was easy to understand.

“Oh, I see~ So for example, if you tell an acquaintance’s fortune and come to the conclusion that they should make a major lifestyle change, then you either have the option of telling it to them straight and risk getting into a fight, or

hiding it and lying about their fortune. Is that right?”

“Yes. That’s exactly it. When it comes to giving advice, you have to remain impartial to some degree. If you would listen earnestly to what your friends say, then you wouldn’t need to ask a fortune-teller.”

“I see. But an unassociated third party would be more likely to lend an ear.”

“Not only that, but telling my own fortune often means that I’m unable to make objective judgments, which defeats the purpose. There are plenty of other fortune-tellers who have made the clear decision not to divine themselves. And fortune-telling isn’t magic that will discover hidden troves of treasure, so telling my own fortune won’t necessarily make me rich.”

The fortune-teller was a pro at this, deftly dodging the point of Halkara’s attack.

I guess this wasn’t her first go-round with the meta questions, huh?

“Understood. I am a businesswoman. I am not aiming to complain about your industry, so I will stand down here and pay.” Halkara seemed satisfied.

“But that aside...I don’t mind divining my own worries.”

“Oh! So you will do it!”

That was an unexpected turn of events.

Laika edged forward toward them. *Why not just stand next to them at this point?*

“But you still have to pay. This is my business, so I’ll do it. And I’ve never divined on myself, so this might be a good chance for that. I will face myself as objectively as possible.”

Hey, so it turned out to be a win-win.

And once again, the **Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Lunaluna~ Moomoonmooooon ♪ Moonmoonmoomoonmoon ♪** song rang out around us. I’d started to memorize a good chunk of it, too...

And since she was divining her own troubles, she sang alone at the part that the customer was supposed to sing along to.

People passed by us, but they didn't really pay us any mind. Had they already heard it a lot?

"...There we go."

Once the song was finished, the fortune-teller spoke with a calm expression.

She was wasting her time with that song. She could probably establish herself as a more mysterious and genuine fortune-teller by finding something better...

"Miss Fortune-Teller, where did you learn that song?" Halkara asked exactly what I was thinking.

"Do not ask me such trivial questions."

No, it sounded pretty important to me, but...we would not be getting an answer.

"And as for the results of my divination—"

This wasn't for me, but I still held my breath.

What was bothering the fortune-teller?

"—What the hell is a moon spirit?! At least make me fire or air or something that's easier to swallow! I hate to say it, but this is too enigmatic for me! I tried becoming a fortune-teller, but I still don't know anything! What on earth is going to become of my life?!"

What a rant!

Wait, this has nothing to do with her fortune! She's just venting! I bet she's just voicing what she regularly thinks about!

That said, I caught a very important bit of information there. She said *moon spirit*, didn't she?

I thought she was a little weird, but she wasn't even a weird *person*.

Another spirit... I sure come across a ton of spirits in my life, huh?

But all the spirits I'd met were after Falfa and Shalsha invited me to the World Spirit Summit. Strictly speaking, I hadn't met any spirits before my daughters

came—but either way, all these encounters were clustered at the very recent part of my three-hundred-year life span. Maybe I have some bizarre connection with spirits now.

I approached the self-professed spirit fortune-teller.

“Excuse me, did you say you were a moon spirit?”

“Yes. You’re probably wondering why I’m working this job—it’s because most spirits get treated like caricatures once they reveal who they are. Whether you believe me or not, I don’t care as long as you treat me no different from before... I’d probably be thinking the same thing if I were in your shoes.”

She was really sulking; her true colors were front and center now.

“No, I believe you. I know quite a few spirits. Actually, I live with them.”

“What?! You *live* with spirits? Are you serious?”

Yes, I got her. I wasn’t sure if this was a good thing, necessarily.

“What kind of spirits do you live with? Tell me, tell me!”

“Slime spirits.”

Falfa and Shalsha, obviously.

But the spirit went back to sulking. “I knew it—you’re pulling my leg... Slime spirits don’t exist...”

My girls had no notoriety whatsoever! Did the spirits not network with each other at all...?

“No, no, no! I’m not lying! They’re genuine water-type spirits! And I also know a droplet spirit and a pine spirit! I’ve even attended the World Spirit Summit!”

She’d believe me if I name-dropped the World Spirit Summit.

“Huh? The *what* summit? What on earth is that?”

“You don’t know?!”

Not only had she never gone, she’d never heard of it!

“I’ve been alone my whole life. I’ve never met another spirit.”

Technically speaking, she had just now. Wynona was also a slime spirit. But

just because they'd had a brief encounter didn't mean they'd realized what they had in common.

"Madam Teacher, my theory is that the moon spirit is so unique that she might not be aware of those like Miss Yufufu." Halkara's guess was probably right.

"Yeah. I was surprised to learn about the jellyfish spirit way back when, but it does make sense that a jellyfish would be a water element. On the other hand... what element would the moon be?"

"What? There are jellyfish spirits? Are there really that many kinds of spirits? I thought there were only a handful in the whole world..."

Why am I teaching a spirit about spirits? "There's enough for this big meeting—more of an event, really—called the World Spirit Summit. There has to be over a hundred. Well, maybe not a hundred... If we have droplet and jellyfish spirits, there's probably two thousand or so..."

"I see... I honestly thought there was only the earth, water, fire, wind, and lightning spirits..." That was the image people had when they didn't know anything about spirits.

"Lady Azusa, I do not think calling over spirits in a place with so much traffic is a good idea, so shall we go somewhere else?" our reasonable Laika suggested.

Yeah, this definitely isn't the best place to talk. "Sure. Let's move. We're here shopping with the family, so we'll have to go find everyone else first, though."

"Okay, then come to the room I've got at the inn here in town," said the fortune-teller. "Now's not the time to do any work anyway."

Same for us—now that we've met a moon spirit, shopping has to drop a few spots on the priority list.

"My name's Azusa. What's yours?"

"Canimeow."

It was like a name for a dog and a cat at the same time.

I thought something like Rabbihop would suit the moon way more, but the whole "rabbit in the moon" thing was from my past life in Japan.

“I know it’s a weird name, but the spelling and sounds were almost perfectly auspicious. I named myself.”

I’d always wondered where spirits got their names, and now I knew—themselves.



We went and rounded up the family and went to the moon spirit Canimeow’s room at the inn.

“I’m Falfa, slime spirit!”

“I am Shalsha, also a slime spirit.”

My daughters greeted the supposed spirit right away.

“I’m Canimeow, the moon spirit... Neither of you really looks like a slime.”

“And you don’t look anything like the moon, either!”

“Yeah... I know... That’s what bothers me...” Canimeow’s head drooped in Falfa’s direction. “I guess it was sixty—no, eighty years ago. Well, we’re rounding anyway, so a hundred years ago is probably about right.”

She was just as vague as all the other spirits...

“Next thing I knew, I was alive in this world. All I knew was that I was the moon spirit.”

Huh, so that’s how it works. I didn’t know a whole lot of stories of how spirits came to be, after all. Spirits didn’t seem to be very interested in their own existence.

“Does that sound similar to when you two were born, Falfa, Shalsha?”

“Yes, we were also born suddenly.”

“But Shalsha was aware that we were an amalgamation of slime souls and of the misfortune that led to our birth. That would be a bit of an exception, but Shalsha and Sis could also be called an exception ourselves. Essentially, spirits do suddenly come into being.”

Shalsha’s explanation was a bit technical, but if we broke it down, it sounded like Canimeow’s experience was fairly typical.

“I’m the moon spirit, but I still don’t have any special powers so I’m just... baffled. I can’t even do anything with the moon, as far as I can tell.” Canimeow thought back to the past.

I guess it would be tough to get a start when the only thing you knew was that you were a spirit of some kind.

“Still, I couldn’t really do anything about it, so I took a part-time job at a cafeteria. I read moon books after that, but it was basically all just myth and no facts. So I quit.”

Well, I guess this was a fantasy world, after all...

Actually, I wondered what was going on with the heavenly bodies in this world.

I spent most of my life not thinking too hard about any of it, but did this world also exist in a Milky Way-type situation...? We had night and day, and we also had a sun, a moon, and stars in the sky...

But the question still remained if the moon in this world was the same one I saw on Earth.

Digging deeper, the question was basically, *What kind of world is this?* Goodly Godly Godness probably knew the answer to that.

I wondered if she’d dodge the question. Or maybe she genuinely had no idea...

Canimeow’s story went on.

“Afterward, I sort of searched around for my place in the world, but I have no relatives or any knowledge in any trade, so I spend about thirty years at the cafeteria thinking.”

Leave it to a spirit to dawdle for three decades.

“I mean, I obviously wanted to do work related to the moon, right? Then one day, as I was walking around town, I spotted a booth doing astrology, and I knew that was it.”

“The moon *is* a heavenly body, huh?”

“After that, I mastered my own fortune-telling style, established myself as a fortune-teller, and here we are now. I eat pretty well for a wanderer.”

“Um, may I ask you something?” Halkara raised her hand. “So all that about the moon’s power and that original song of yours... What does it all mean?”

“The moon’s power is how you feel,” Canimeow gave an answer that was basically just fluff. “And the song, I made up.”

No depth to any of it!

“But I like the song. I often sing it to myself as I walk around.”

She never attracted much attention since she moved around so much, but rumors of her would most certainly start to spread among her neighbors if she settled down somewhere...

“Oh, I’ve got a solid base as a fortune-teller. When I was at the bottom of the ladder, I wrote horoscopes for the town’s information brochure, and I read a lot of books about fortune-tellers in my free time. After that, I also studied by taking an apprenticeship.”

So she became a fortune-teller based purely on technical skills.

“I must applaud you for how stable you sound professionally, but there’s nothing spiritual to your story at all... I believe you would make more money by taking on a job as a divine oracle or something...”

As always, Halkara’s notion of moneymaking served as her point of reference.

I could see where she was coming from. People go to fortune-tellers when they want to call on a power greater than they could imagine.

“It’s all right. I’m in the top twenty percent of earners among all fortune-tellers. Plenty of us have to take a second job to make ends meet. And there are a lot of housewives who use their own houses and treat the job as a side gig.”

I wasn’t really asking about the intricacies of the fortune-telling industry.

But then, Canimeow buried her head in her hands.

“But the more I advance my career as a fortune-teller, I start wondering more and more...what even *is* a moon spirit supposed to be? As my life gets more

stable, I instead start tearing my hair out over that fundamental question...”

This was a surprisingly heavy topic.

The eternal question: What am I?

In my case, I have firm memories of being reborn as an immortal, unaging witch, so that never bothered me. I thoroughly enjoyed my slow, relaxing life, and if I ever felt bored, I could go off on a journey or give myself new goals.

But if all you were given was that you’re a moon spirit and literally nothing else—that’s hard.

“I’m a moon spirit, but I have no influence over the moon at all? Do other spirits even exist? I’ve never met one before! I don’t even really get the concept of spirits in the first place! There’s no one around to answer any of my questions!”

Laika and Rosalie listened on with pain in their eyes.

On the other hand, Flatorte was asleep... One of us had a bit less empathy than the others. But I didn’t mind; how weird would it be if Flatorte started questioning what it meant to be a dragon?

Anyway...I got the sense Canimeow was happy to have met us.

“Falfa and Shalsha can talk to you about what it means to be a spirit! We can get help from other spirits, too!”

“If you talk to Miss Yufufu, then you should receive a notice about the World Spirit Summit in a few decades or centuries or so. No need to worry.”

Falfa and Shalsha immediately offered some ideas. They’d be great to teach her about spirits.

“Thanks... This is a miracle.” Canimeow was tearing up.

I had no idea we’d end up helping a spirit today. It was nice seeing how happy we’d made her.

“As thanks, I’ll divine your fortune for free. Any takers?”

I clapped my hand on Laika’s back. “You’re up, Laika.” She was the type to get into this.

“A-all right...”

Laika was pretty shy when it came to these things, so I had to give a bigger push. I was her teacher, after all, so I had to be mindful.

“Ah, the dragon-girl. What fortune would you like told?”

“When I fight, should I step forward with my right foot, or should I do so with my left foot?”

Her question was more for practical fights than anything else!

“Uh... I think...you should ask a specialist...” Canimeow was perplexed by the question, too.

Even if the moon was guiding her in some manner or another, she still probably wouldn’t know the answer to that.

“A-all right, then... I never know when exactly I should use fire during battle, so what would be the optimal way? I create many more openings on myself if I miss, so...”

“Please ask that to a specialist, too. I’ve never breathed fire before, so I don’t know... Are there any decisions you’re having trouble making?”

“Not particularly—I choose my own paths! And even if I decide a choice I once made was wrong, I fully intend to live a life with no regrets!”

“You’re too emotionally strong for fortune-telling!”

That’s what I thought! Even with an interest in fortune-telling, Laika still had absolutely no idea what to ask the moon!

“Okay, then... Should I divine your luck for the next year...?”

We should probably leave this to the professional at this point.

“Yes, please! But...will I have to sing that peculiar song that you used for your divining with you...?” Laika drooped her reddened face, embarrassed.

“Oh, if you’re planning to ask, then just go ahead and call it silly! I’d rather you just do it already! I see you’re trying not to hurt my feelings, but that only leaves a deeper cut! Has anyone ever used the word *peculiar* to compliment you in your life, ever?!”

Canimeow was right...

“I am sorry... I will cast away my shame and sing with pride!”

“You can’t sing the song with shame! I put a lot of effort into making this song!”

One thing we do know about this moon spirit is that she has no musical sense at all!

Laika’s luck for the next year turned out to be the abstract “pretty good.”

A “pretty good” life was the best kind. If it’s really *really* good, then there’s only one way to go but down. But if it’s going not-so-great most of the time, then that itself is hard to deal with.

Taking things slowly, bit by bit, and enjoying life—that’s the way to go.

And since Canimeow was offering free readings, almost everyone had their turn after that. I say *almost* because Flatorte showed absolutely no interest.

“Next is you there, the dragon. What would you like me to divine?”

“Laika said everything I wanted to say—I’ll carve out my own future. Who cares what you tell me in a fortune? I, the great Flatorte, am the great Flatorte.”

“Wow, it sounds so cool when you put it that way...,” I remarked.

It sounded like real wisdom, even though she’s clearly just soaring through life with an empty head.

“Yeah. Single-minded personalities like yours don’t need their fortunes told. Fortune-telling gives courage to people who are hesitating to make the first step. The people who need it are anxious about something or other, so those with no hesitations just need to keep moving forward.”

Canimeow sounded like a real pro there. Even with her own worries, this moon spirit took her craft seriously.

I bet she’d made a ton of people happy with her fortunes in her career.

“Also, that *moomoomoon, moonmoonmoon* 🎵 song is stupid.”

“You have it wrong! It’s **moonmoonmoomoonmoon** 🎵! You need the *energy!*”

She was extremely attached to that song.

“Whatever you say. It still doesn’t change how stupid it is. The melody is flat, and it’s hard to sing. At least add a little variation to the end refrain.”

Flatorte’s criticism had some real musical knowledge behind it. She had a keen sense for these things, after all.

“I, the great Flatorte, will arrange it for you. Although it would be easier with a lute.”

It took about fifteen minutes.

“You said to me~ I wanna be reborn as the sun~ ♪ But the quiet moon~ Is who I’d rather be~ ♪ (Skipping the middle part) I wanna show you the way~ On the darkest nights~ ♪

“—It’s kind of rough, but I arranged it for you.”

Falfa and Shalsha clapped in excitement. I gave her a good round of applause, too.

If she had a guitar for accompaniment, I’d be transfixed listening to her.

“You really are musical, Flatorte. That was a real song.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Mistress.” Flatorte wasn’t as airheaded as I thought.

But—

“This song isn’t anything like the original at all! Do it again! No, don’t, because I’m sticking with the old version!” Canimeow had no intention of accepting it.

“The original was so terrible there was nothing worth keeping. What else am I supposed to do?”

“If it doesn’t give any inspiration to the fortune-telling, then there’s no point! The musical merit doesn’t matter!”

Well, whatever Canimeow herself decides to use is best.

In the meanwhile, I had her tell my fortune of what my luck would be like for the next several years. And yes, I sang the weird song. I’d heard it so many times that it would be showing up in my dreams soon...

“While you yourself are sturdy and unmovable...you’ll be finding yourself encountering all sorts of trouble... And I mean, there will be a *lot*, so please live carefully.”

“Okay... That’s pretty standard for me already...”

Ever since I maxed out my level, it’d been nothing but trouble. At the very least, I now knew just how accurate her fortunes were.

Whether you’re spirit or human, you should make the most of your natural gifts.



Afterward, I brought Canimeow to Momma Yufufu, the droplet spirit.

The goal was, of course, to give Canimeow information on spirits.

I didn’t want to trouble Momma Yufufu by bringing in too many people, so I was the only one who came from the house in the highlands.

I also had Momma Yufufu invite Misjantie the pine spirit over. The more participants, the better.

“Oh, my~ The moon spirit~ Now you are quite the valuable one~”

Momma Yufufu accepted Canimeow with her usual smile.

“So you’ve never heard of spirits for heavenly bodies like me, then?” Canimeow asked, barely waiting for Momma Yufufu to finish talking. Canimeow was starting to look more like a customer at her fortune-telling booth herself.

“I haven’t. I’ve never heard of a sun spirit, at least. I would think they would be a bit too powerful. The ability to freely manipulate the sun could create some genuine problems... Not that I know much about astronomy, however.”

Yeah, that would probably result in the destruction of the world. Although actually, no one here had even proved our planet was round.

I’d never heard of anyone who successfully traveled around the world. Even the demons, who’d made advances in all kinds of different fields, still didn’t know. I hadn’t heard of any fast-flying dragons who’d pulled it off, either.

I guess this was something I needed to ask the gods about. If it came down to

it, I'd probably end up asking Godly Godness or Nintan...

"Spirits typically preside over a natural phenomenon, man. Like Yufufu for water droplets and me for pine trees. We know the moon's a heavenly body, and now that we know there's a moon spirit, we gotta assume the others might have spirits, too."

Misjantie was good at explaining, probably because she worked as a wedding coordinator. I was glad she'd come along.

"But Yufufu's right, man. We've never met any celestial spirits. The moon is outside of the world, so...this whole new celestial spirit thing is kinda huge."

Right—if we suppose this world is a planet on its own, then the moon is something else.

"Man, if the other spirits catch wind of this—literally, if the zephyrs find out—this'd be a scoop to shake the whole spirit world."

"Y'know, I keep hearing about the wind spirits. What are they like...?"

"They take all kinds of info and spread it around on the wind, man. Lots of it is fake, though, so you need some careful critical-thinking skills. Some spirits you can't trust at all since they get all their information on the wind."

Ah, so tabloid-level trustworthiness, then...

"But now that we know you are a spirit, I'll be sure to send you a notice for the future World Spirit Summits~ We haven't decided when we'll hold the next one, but we are planning on it~ It may be another three or five centuries~ Or perhaps next year as a surprise~"

So long as spirits remained this vague, I doubted they would ever start sticking to anything resembling a schedule.

"Thank you, Yufufu and Misjantie. I think I'm getting a better grasp of who I am."

It was like a weight had been lifted off Canimeow's shoulders.

She'd gotten a little closer to her roots, and more importantly, she could now join the spirit community. It's so much easier to get through life with help from others instead of trying to make it through entirely on your own. I hoped the

spirits would keep working together into the future.

“Could I come here again if I feel like it?”

“Of course. I’ll whip up some yummy pancakes for you.” Momma Yufufu was never the type to turn down guests.

“But how am I supposed to get here...?”

“Oh, can’t you teleport?” Yufufu asked.

“Not all spirits can do that, man.”

The definition of spirit was already shaky... Couldn’t they figure this out among themselves?

“And thanks, Azusa. I think I can finally say goodbye to my life of loneliness.” Canimeow also thanked me.

“I should be grateful to you, too. Both spirits and witches are kind of the odd ones out in this world, so I hope we get along well enough that we don’t annoy each other.”

“Yeah. I think I’ll be sticking around Nascúte and that whole province, so I’ll see you when I see you, I guess.”

Great! We ended up helping someone, and I felt pretty good about it, too.

But there was someone else in this room who had business with Canimeow.

“Hey, Canimeow, I want ya to work in front of my temple,” Misjantie offered as she rubbed her hands together. “I promise I’ll treat you good, man. Just listen to what I gotta say, ’kay?”

I had kind of a bad feeling about this, so I decided to keep a close eye on what Misjantie was going to do...



A little while later, I hopped on dragon Laika, and we made our way to the main Misjantie Temple.

The once-dreary street in front of the temple had gotten a bit of life back.

This was fantastic. I thought I saw a few more young women, too.

But that wasn't enough to soothe my nerves.

There was a store near the temple that had a lot more activity than anywhere else. Miraculously, it even had a line snaking out of it.

I looked up at the sign.

"I knew it!"

Ignoring the jacked-up price for now, I was bothered by something else. I decided I'd come back once she closed up for the day.

Also, I could hear that **"Lunaluna~ ♪"** song coming from her shop. She was definitely not planning on changing that part.

The customers lined up were laughing, too.

"Yeah, it's really weird."

Misjantie Authorized Establishment

☆

☆

FORTUNE-TELLING

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LUNAR GUIDANCE

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The world's greatest fortunes! ☆

The pine spirit herself approves!

Have your fortune told by the

moon spirit!

Receive full support for your next step!

Faithfully accepting wedding consultations.

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Consultation Fee ☆

3,000 gold for 10 minutes

“I’ve never heard it before, but it’s hilarious.”

That weird song was increasing her fame... I guess all’s well that ends well.

When the sun started to set, the fortune-telling shop closed, and I visited Canimeow inside. As a permanent establishment, the inner decorations were rather well put together, including pictures of the moon shining in the night sky.

“Oh, Azusa. Misjantie asked me to set up shop, so here I am.”

“Yep, Misjantie told me all about it when I brought her along, so I know.”

Misjantie herself was pale. I suspected she was feeling a bit guilty.

“It’s uh, y-y’know... I thought it’d be perfect to open a fortune-telling joint right in front of a temple with a history with marriage... That’s all, man... She could divine the perfect date for a wedding, too...”

“Hey, Canimeow. Did Misjantie tell you to tell your customers that holding a wedding at the Misjantie Temple will bring them happiness forever?”

“More or less. If I’m being honest,” Canimeow replied easily.

I turned to glare at Misjantie, who turned her head away.

“But I haven’t. My career as a fortune-teller would be over if I started saying lies. I tell people who shouldn’t get married that they shouldn’t, and if someone doesn’t appear to have money for a ceremony, then I tell them not to worry about it,” Canimeow replied with a bright smile.

“I’m so glad you’re honest, Canimeow.”

I really hoped our moon spirit would get rewarded for this one day.

“See? No problem, man...”

“If I ever hear anything about you scamming people, I’m going to tell the wind spirits to spread rumors about the Misjantie Temple’s awful business practices.”

“P-please don’t, man!”

Misjantie flung herself to the ground, so I forgave her.



WE WENT TO THE ADVENTURERS' MEET WITH MY STEPDAUGHTER



"She's not here today, either..."

As I stared at the calendar, the slightest hint of a frown crossed my face. Probably—I wasn't looking at a mirror.

"Madam Teacher, Miss Beelzebub came by three days ago," Halkara said from the kitchen as she washed the vegetables. Apparently today was not a day at the factory for her.

"No, I'm not waiting for her."

"Then have you ordered something to be delivered? So many places deliver by wyvern now; it's so nice~"

"Is that how they do it now...? The times sure are changing... But that's not it, either." I didn't think Halkara would guess correctly, so I jumped straight to the answer. "You know I've got a stepdaughter, Wynona."

"Ah, yes. The one you mentioned before."

I'd filled Halkara in on the story after we spotted her at Canimeow's booth before.

"I never really expected her to be excited about coming to visit, but...I thought she'd have said hi at least once by now. That's why I'm waiting. I guess I've gotta go to her..."

But I had a feeling I wouldn't be welcome if I went by myself, and I'd certainly be bothering her if I took the whole family along. Point is—I wanted to introduce her to the rest of the family, but that would be hard unless Wynona came to the house in the highlands.

"Wynona was the first-place winner in the newcomer division of This Adventurer Is Amazing! right? Adventurers that sometimes come to buy our

products were talking about her.”

“I see... I guess she’s kinda famous, huh?”

“But the further up the ranks you go, there is an emphasis not just on strength but on looks and a memorable persona. Many adventurers say that those rankings are unreliable.”

And here comes reality!

“It is essentially just a popularity vote, after all. In the past fifty years or so, all the top places, including the newcomer division, have been given to women. The adventurer industry is dominated by men, so all the girls that are popular with the male adventurers go straight to the top.”

“So they’re just voting for their favorite idols!”

That system had more problems than I thought.

“On the other hand, adventurers with strangely wide networks of connections will get in with guild staff who have voting powers. They always end up in the middle of the general rankings. There are quite a lot of problems.”

It was kind of sad to hear about how all these politics were in the adventurer industry, too...

I had believed it was more for people who lived life on the edge.

But I guess total hermits wouldn’t get any votes since no one would know about them...

“Supposedly all rankings solidify like this at some point or another. Miss Beelzebub said that the most famous restaurant rankings in the demon lands essentially have the same few at the top every year, so it’s no longer interesting.”

“I guess the most famous ones would always be at the top, huh.”

I doubted any super well-known places would change their flavors all of a sudden every year. Once someone takes the top, it’s hard to kick them down.

“If something reaches the top twice in a row, the demons have normalized putting it into a ‘hall of fame.’”

“People sure have all sorts of ideas, don’t they? Oh, we’re off topic.” I wasn’t here to chat about how rankings worked. “Anyway, I wanted to introduce Wynona to the family. She’s Falfa and Shalsha’s younger sister, which makes her **my** (STEP)**daughter**. But she hasn’t come by yet... Maybe I should just send her an invitation...”

“Ahhh, but if she ranked first in the adventurer newcomer division, then she must be incredibly busy right now. Wouldn’t she be touring around the country?”

“Oh, you might be right...”

Adventurers had to go on adventures, after all, and if her travels took her too far, she wouldn’t come back for months.

“Whether she can go from newcomer hot stock to the upper echelons of the general rankings and gain stable work as an adventurer hinges on these moments now. I believe she will have to travel to guilds all around and advertise herself. Those guilds will be getting plenty of visits from other cute and pretty girls, after all.”

I didn’t really want to hear about the cruel reality of the idol—er, adventurer industry!

“It isn’t much of a problem for elves or other long-lived races, but they will lose popularity once they start aging. A very famous female ex-adventurer once wrote in a book, *Female adventurers must make as much money as they can, when they can. Don’t expect any pampering when you reach your forties or fifties. Earn your life savings in your first ten years and retire early.*”

I’d lived in this world for three hundred years, and I was starting to think this fantasy world was really lacking in the “fantasy” part.

“Which means that your Wynona will be working her hardest right about now. Her youth will be her peak.”

“Wynona is Falfa and Shalsha’s little sister—a slime spirit, basically, so I don’t think she’s going to age at all looks-wise.”

“Still, once you start falling from the top, people see you as a has-been, on the way out. She must stick to it now.”

“This really isn’t glamorous at all...”

“The ‘has-been’ label is more trying than you might think. That negative image is difficult to shake off, so it’s best to train your hardest while you’re an unknown and then shoot up the rankings all at once.”

Halkara sure was talkative. Was she like this when it came to the pharmaceutical industry, too?

“Veterans past their glory days will sometimes don masks and ‘debut’ as mysterious masked newcomers; it feels almost like a game. The famous female ex-adventurer also wrote in her book, *Making a comeback is far more difficult than simply debuting and basking in the praise.*”

I was wanting to read this woman’s book.

“Well, I guess that just means Wynona’s very likely traveling around the country. I hope she’s walking the right path for an adventurer.”

Which meant she definitely wouldn’t be able to come to the house in the highlands.

Back in my past life as a corporate wage slave, I was scarcely able to go anywhere... I didn’t have any energy to do fun things on the weekends, and I barely had any weekends to begin with anyway.

Just as that thought crossed my mind—

There was a knock on the door.

“Oh, who could that be?” I went to the front and slowly opened the door.

Well, well. Speak of the devil, as they say.

There stood Wynona.

Just like last time, she had that sullen and haughty vibe around her.

“Greetings, *Step*mother. It’s me, Margrave Wynona of Idell.”

She made sure to remind me what exactly our relationship was.

“Oh, yeah, it’s been a little while,” I said. “Are you here to hang out today?”

Right now, I didn’t really care that she was leaning so hard into the *step* part

of stepmother. I was just happy that she came to visit. In all honesty, this was perfect timing.

“No, I am not here to ‘hang out.’ Unlike you, Stepmother, I am rather busy.”

Is that what you say to someone you haven’t seen in a while...? But I’ll hold my tongue. This is just how she is.

“I have come to you today for some advice. I thought you might know how to deal with this issue.”

If she was coming to me for advice, then I really wished she’d be a little less arrogant, but I kept my mouth shut.

Not all children showered their parents with love. But for a daughter who acted so brazenly, this was actually fairly typical behavior.

I also had more daughters now, so I needed to mature as a mother!

“Sure, then take a seat. And since you’re here now, I’ll go get the family.”

“All right. As a compromise, I suppose that’s—”

I left the room before she finished speaking; I knew I’d get pissed if I heard the full sentence. Compromise, she says—*compromise!!* That’s not something someone who’s asking for help says!

I trusted that Halkara, who had been washing vegetables in the kitchen, could deal with Wynona well enough.

I went around and gathered the people in their rooms, our ghost who was just floating around, and our mandragora who was in the dirt outside. Unlike regular households, you had to go pretty far afield to find where everyone normally liked to hang out.

Anyway, I at least created an opportunity to have everyone introduce themselves.

“All right, this is Margrave Wynona of Idell. She’s a slime spirit and basically Falfa and Shalsha’s younger sister. Which makes her my—”

“—Stepdaughter, essentially,” Wynona cut me off. It sounded like she wasn’t going to budge on the *step* part of my title. “I make a living as an adventurer. I

believe some of you may know of me already.”

“Yes, I got your autograph just now!”

So cheeky, Halkara.

What was written in her notebook said, *All is white. Wynona*. Was that her motto? *I guess that works, but I dunno...*

“Falfa’s so happy you’re here~! ♪”

“Shalsha welcomes you as your older sister. Your older sister.”

Of course, Falfa and Shalsha readily welcomed her. Shalsha especially seemed delighted to be able to act the part of big sister now. She even repeated that part twice.

“It has been a long time, Sisters. I am Wynona.”

Wynona daintily lifted her all-white clothing and politely curtsied like a noble. Her hardened expression softened a little bit for them, too.

But even though she looked like a noble, she wasn’t actually of any aristocratic heritage. She was just calling herself the Margrave of Idell. I mean, she was a slime spirit who was born not too long ago, after all...

“So you’re Big Sis’s daughters’ little sister—which means you’re family already. I’m Rosalie the ghost, nice to meetcha!”

“Sandra, the mandragora. A slime spirit won’t damage plants, which makes you better than humans.”

“You’re an adventurer, huh. You should fight me sometime!”

The rest of the family meeting her now gave their greetings. I was kind of iffy on whether what Flatorte said qualified as a greeting or not, but it probably did in the blue-dragon world. They had games where a conversation immediately led to a fight, after all.

“I will not be sparring with you. It will not earn me a single piece of gold.”

She sure was cold to everyone but her big sisters...

“What?! Winning a fight makes me happy, even if I don’t make anything from it!”

“And? If you wish to spar with others that badly, go enter a tournament or something.”

Wynona handled Flatorte coolly, but what she said made sense—Flatorte could join a martial arts tournament if she wanted to. It was actually kind of weird that she’d never tried to enter them in the past.

“Blue dragons are banned from most tournaments.”

How much trouble had they caused in the past?!

“Tournament operators are not fond of the blue dragons, since they destroy the venues... While it may not be *your* personal fault, Flatorte, it is partially their own doing...,” Laika explained. It sounded like blue dragons were problem children on a whole new level relative to the rest of the dragons.

“There are at least five tournaments where I, the great Flatorte, am responsible for the ban.”

She was literally on the blacklist!

“Let us set aside the sparring topic for now. I came today because I am in need of advice.” Wynona’s face clouded over.

Even she had her worries. I couldn’t imagine what they might be, though.

“I have actually been invited to clear a dungeon with the party who got first place in the This Adventurer Is Amazing! newcomer party division.”

Huh, so there was a party division.

Adventurers typically acted in groups, so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised.

“That was not so bad in itself. They were looking to enter the skills-review tournament for adventurers who clear the Mina Mia Sagaya Grove to the south as a party. Those who do well there become even more well-known in the adventuring world.”

“Ah, the Mina Mia Sagaya Grove is one of the four great skills-review tournaments for adventurers.” Halkara was following along, but I had no idea what was going on...

“So...what is a skills-review tournament?” I asked. “I’m having trouble

envisioning what kind of tournament this is exactly...”

“It seems none of you are particularly knowledgeable in this field, so I shall explain.” Wynona cleared her throat in an affected manner.

She wasn’t acting like she was here for help at all... *I really need to speak to her parents. Wait—that’s me!*

But I never got to raise her, so this wasn’t my fault. Nope, not at all.

“Nowadays, adventurers are not warring against the demons, human nations are not at war with each other, and every country has their own armies. So adventurers have far less to do than they did in the past. If we take it to its extreme logical conclusion, then we no longer need adventurers.” Wynona’s words were harsh, but this was the objective reality. “Thus, adventurers like to measure their skills in competition. We hold competitions where we explore one specific area at the same time in order to measure our skill. That is what a skills-review tournament is.”

“The adventurer job is turning into a sport, huh?”

“You are generally correct, Stepmother.”

She didn’t have to stick stepmother on there...

“Of course, there are some adventurers who take on odd jobs to make a daily income, and there are some who dedicate their lives to clearing their local caves. However, if one wishes to make a name for themselves in the industry, then succeeding in tournaments and whatnot is extremely important.”

So some people treated it as a hobby, but there were definitely others who were aiming for the top.

Sports in my previous life were just like that, divided between pros and amateurs.

“Oh yeah, I feel like I’ve heard something like that from Natalie at the guild in Flatta...”

“Your slime dispatching must be more of the local type of business, Lady Azusa. You’re like an adventurer clearing the local area of monsters to keep the region safe.”

“You’re probably right, Laika,” I replied. “But slimes can multiply all they want, and they shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Oh, no, if they are left to multiply on their own, then they may harm children, so they must be exterminated!”

“Miss Laika is right,” said Shalsha. “Evil slimes are dangerous.”

“And it’s hard to have any good slimes if there’s too many evil slimes~!” added Falfa.

Maybe what the slime spirit sisters said was true. I still wasn’t sure how to tell the difference between good and evil slimes, though.

“Either way, I understand now that the party that got first place in their division asked you to join them. But I’m guessing there’s a reason why you can’t, right?”

She came to me for advice, so there must have been something wrong.

“That’s correct.” Wynona nodded. “The people in the party were not people I wish to freely associate with, so I ultimately had to turn them down.” Her expression clouded.

“Are they really that bad?”

She nodded slowly again.

“They call themselves the Black Knights! They clad themselves entirely in black armor!”

“What?”

I had no idea what she was trying to say, so I stared blankly at her.

“They wear nothing but black! How awful is that?! Clothes are supposed to be white! And of all the colors—black! What absurdity!”

Oh right. I almost forgot. This girl was obsessed with the color white. Even her pets were white animals...

“Hey... Couldn’t you just compromise? Everyone likes different colors, so...”

“Stepmother! I like the color white because I believe it is the greatest thing to

exist! I know who I am!”

Wynona was getting worked up. She was going to launch into a rant, and I was tired of it already.

“On the contrary, they do not even care about the color! When I asked these Black Knights why they were so particular about this choice, they replied, ‘Because dirt doesn’t show up on black’!”

“Now, *that’s* a practical reason!”

“I could have accepted them if they believed all life in the world originated in the darkness or something like that. I could have compromised with them. But I cannot *bear* even the thought of joining a group who chooses their clothes because it’s easy to *clean*!”

Wynona was way too concerned about this stuff for her own good, and now she was stuck with adventurers who didn’t care at all...

“And so I lost my cool, and I said to them, ‘Do not talk to me again. If you do, I will bleach your bones white.’”

You even bring it in when you’re picking a fight?!

“But a party is required in order to join the upcoming skills-review tournament. At this rate, I will be unable to participate, and then I will have nothing on my record. I am desperate. I am a drowning woman grasping at straws.”

“Great, good to know our advice means so much.”

Almost a third of me was like, *Who cares?* on the inside.

But she was my daughter, so I wasn’t going to say that...

“Miss Wynona, I think it would be a good idea to partner up with a different adventuring party,” Laika offered.

Pfft.

A cynical smile crossed Wynona’s face.

“I have no friends.”

“Then make some!”

I couldn't help but say something. I'm her mom; I can't stay quiet...

“Stepmother, please do not get the wrong idea. There are no adventurers *worthy* enough to be my friend. It's entirely out of my hands.”

“I mean, if that's how you talk to them, it's no wonder you can't make any adventurer friends.”

“And yet I still ranked first in the newcomer division. So?” Wynona glared at me.

I had a feeling she was getting excessively proud after ranking first...

“It is true that I've been unable to find other worthy adventurers. The one who placed second in the newcomer division wears cute, pink-heavy outfits, and while the one who placed third does incorporate some white, she mostly uses patterns with an equal amount of black and white. The one who placed fourth mostly wears vibrant primary-color clothes...”

Were we talking about the fashion industry now?

Was her problem that no other adventurer wore mainly white?

“That said, the male adventurers have clear ulterior motives. It's quite obvious that they simply want to work with the girl in first place of the newcomer division... And then I wonder if they may come to peek on me as I bathe, and the prospect feels so filthy that I cannot even consider it...”

“Ah, so you're kind of like an idol, aren't you...?”

Just being a female adventurer in the male-dominated adventurer industry meant the bar was already set higher for them.

“And if I foolishly join an all-male party, then I may garner endless criticism and plummet in the rankings. Thus, the parties that I am eligible to join are limited to begin with...”

It sounded like all the limitations were giving her trouble.

“So... I was hoping you would be able to offer me some of your wisdom...”
Wynona's initially aggressive tone simmered down to almost a whisper.

She was asking for wisdom, but I knew what she actually wanted. She wanted me to join her party.

“Sure. If you want me to, I’ll do it.” I stood slowly from my seat. “As your stepmother, I’d be more than happy to help you out. But I’d get a lot of attention if I join with the name Azusa, so...I’ll need a fake name...”

Wynona looked up at me but then immediately looked away in embarrassment.

“Th-thank you, Step...Stepmother...”

She said it like the *mother* barely applied...

But a bashful thank-you wasn’t all that bad. I didn’t mind my stepdaughter coming to me for help. *Your stepmom’ll do all she can. I’ll show you what I’m capable of.*

“Is two people enough for a party?”

“No, we need at least three to join.”

Which meant taking travel to the location into consideration...

I looked at Laika.

“Please allow me to participate!” she said before I could even ask.

“That’s a party, then.”

“I want to go, too, Mistress!” Flatorte stood, excited for her chance to spar with somebody.

“You are too famous, so no.” Wynona waved her off.

“Does everyone already know the amazing exploits of the great Flatorte?!”

“Many requests have been made in your home region to keep an eye out for you. They want to keep you away due to all the trouble you caused in the past.”

She was also on the blacklist in the adventuring world!

Of our family, only Laika and I ended up participating.



It was the early morning on the day of the skills-review tournament. I was

wearing my headband with horns.

“Lady Azusa, those horns...still look very cute on you.”

Laika’s face was red. Why were these horns all it took to get this kind of reaction out of her?

“Laika, you’re not reacting to me with the horns but just to the horns themselves, right?”

“Oh, no, not quite... Horns simply catch a dragon’s attention, that’s all...”

Yes, in other words.

For some animals, a fantastic set of horns made them more attractive. Maybe it wasn’t that unusual.

We were staying in an inn in a town not too far from the Mina Mia Sagaya Grove. The grove was a full day’s journey, due south from the house in the highlands, so even taking Laika to the location meant we needed to stay the night before.

“Ah, it’s all right. I’m planning on acting as Azusard while we’re adventuring, so just treat me like that, okay?”

Azusard was the fake name I used when we cleared the Bugabee Underground Ruins. It wasn’t much of a fake name, but I was trying to pretend I was a dragon.

“Yes, of course, Lady Azusa!”

“Hey, Laika! You didn’t even keep to it for a minute!” I couldn’t believe she messed up our agreement that quickly.

“Ah... My apologies, Lady Azusa—Oh... I did it again...” Laika was supremely flustered. Our proper, polite dragon was so used to calling me Lady Azusa that she was going to have a hard time remembering my fake name.

The real reason was because it would be a huge pain if people found out I was the Witch of the Highlands... She just needed to do her best.

“By the way, Lady Azusa—”

“You’re not even trying, are you?”

She was making the same mistake with such frequency that I was starting to think it was less of a mistake and more just spite.

“A-anyway...” Oh, so she was going with the don’t-use-my-name-at-all strategy. “I wonder where Miss Wynona went. She has been gone all morning.”

When I woke up, Wynona was already gone.

Well, it wasn’t like she ran off without a word—she had apparently told Laika, who was already awake, that she was going out before leaving.

“Maybe—surprise, surprise—she went out to go look for white foods?”

“...That is possible.”

Last night, all she ate was bread and cheese with white rinds.

I told her that an unbalanced diet was bad for her, but she only said, “I am a slime spirit, so no need to worry.” And I couldn’t argue with that...

But wouldn’t that then mean Falfa and Shalsha didn’t have to eat vegetables? I didn’t want them to grow up completely unable to eat any greens, though...

The inn was lively for such a remote town. I could hear laughter coming from the other rooms. I bet the majority of them were adventurers headed toward the grove.

“It feels like we’re all here to climb a mountain or compete in a national sports meet.”

In this day and age, there weren’t a whole lot of fiendish monsters out there, and in a worst-case scenario, the demons would take care of them. Adventurers had no choice but to show off their skills in tournaments and stuff.

“I wasn’t expecting this event, but I am so happy I get to show off the fruits of my daily training!” Laika balled both her hands into fists.

“You really are the model student, Laika. We’ll just take this easy. And...we would probably win by a landslide if you went all out in this tournament... Weren’t you the strongest person in Nanterre Province before I showed up?”

“Oh, no... I was simply full of myself at the time... Others must have been far more worthy than I...”

Telling Laika not to be so humble was like telling water not to be wet. She was the type to genuinely acknowledge her weaknesses whenever she encountered them, and that's probably what made her get so powerful.

As we chatted, the door opened. Wynona was back, and she was carrying a really big bag.

Her outfit was, as always, white. And it was a dress, which made it really hard to think she would be fighting in it at all. But I guess it wasn't much different from what Laika normally wore.

"Greetings, the both of you. I was out on a search."

"A search for what?"

"It would be easier if I showed you."

She pulled out of the bag...white clothing. And a ton of it.

"What? What is this?"

"Clothes."

"No. That's not what I mean! Why did you bring them?"

"The both of you will be changing into this. It is best to wear a pure-white outfit to display one's unsullied spirit."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, but then you can see all the dirt!"

And even if you couldn't, an adventuring party that wore all white was kind of terrifying...

"Stepmother, that other party I told you about calls themselves the Black Knights, so there is nothing to worry about. If they will allow black, then they will allow white."

"But you know they're wearing armor, right? This isn't armor—it's just regular clothes! Some of this is for a dance festival or a wedding..."

"Yes, and one must display one's unsullied spirit in a wedding, too, as you must in battle."

Why are wedding clothes and adventuring clothes the same?

“Stepmother, you will help me, yes? You will obey me. I am not asking you to wear a mourning dress to battle.”

Wearing a dance festival getup to a battle was just about as weird as a mourning dress...

“There are other upsides to this, too.”

“Oh? Lemme hear it.”

“While all the other adventurers are wearing regular clothes, **the ones wearing pure-white dresses will be recognized as powerful characters.**”

“You’re probably right, but is that relevant to anything?!”

You’d definitely get a boss vibe from us—the ones with a unique design usually weren’t regular old cannon fodder. I’d be on my guard if I were a normal adventurer.

“You understand, don’t you, Laika?” Wynona asked the dragon, who was looking on with interest. She must’ve thought I was being stubborn.

“I-if Lady Azusa says it’s all right, then I will wear whatever I must...”

Laika didn’t do too well with forceful personalities...

But if I refused to change, then I couldn’t participate, and then we’d be back to square one.

“Fine. We’ll change.” I folded. It wasn’t like I was wearing any armor to begin with, and I couldn’t see any downsides besides standing out horribly.

“Thank you.”

I wondered how genuine that thanks actually was, but Wynona still bowed.

And so the all-white party made their debut in the grove.

I personally wouldn’t want to run across us at dusk. We might be mistaken for some otherworldly beings...

“Since you so kindly wore white for me, I will do you a favor and divine your luck for today.”

Wynona slipped out a white sphere from her sleeve. Very fortune-teller-

esque.

“Huh, so you can do magic *and* fortune-telling.”

“The study of magic is quite similar to divination, after all.”

I guess that was true. Maybe I was the exception, since I knew how to use magic before I learned it properly.

“Then you didn’t need to go all the way to Nascúte to have Canimeow tell your fortune... Oh right, you can’t divine yourself.”

Maybe part of the demand of fortune-tellers came from other fortune-tellers?

“Now then, let’s begin.”

Wynona started mumbling something. As she did, the white sphere in her hand began to float.

“Whoa, that’s real magic... And a kind of magic I’ve never heard of before...”

I could use magic, but this looked like it was from a totally different school.

“I am a spirit, so I am able to use unique magic.”

She wasn’t human, so she could probably easily learn from schools that humans struggled with.

“Stepmother, could you move to the side a bit? And, Laika, please come forward.”

We did as she said, and Wynona slowly closed her eyes.

The white sphere shuddered ever so slightly.

“All was once infinitely carved from the singularity... Thence are we all born—you and I, the earth and stars... As we share the same mother, so we share the same destiny...”

Ooh, that was a real incantation.

I knew she liked to emphasize that I was only her *step*mother, but I was still happy to see a daughter of mine growing up into a fine young lady. I hoped she had a fantastic tenure in the adventuring world in the future.

“I see it.” Wynona opened her eyes, and her white sphere plopped down into her palm.

“What did you see...?”

This was serious stuff. Even if she didn’t make it as an adventurer, I bet she could still make a living as a fortune-teller.

“Stepmother, your lucky color today is white.”

“That fortune tells you your lucky color?!”

What a silly answer after all that buildup!

“And, Laika, your lucky color today is white.”

“Hey! Do you ever get a lucky color that isn’t white?! You sure you’re not just saying white for everything?”

“You are so rude, Stepmother.”

Whoops, maybe I was going a little too hard.

“When my style of fortune-telling is properly performed, you will always get the lucky color white. It is the superior color, and justly so.”

“White is the default, then!”

The whole thing was for her to proselytize to us about her favorite color.

“And so, it is best to wear your lucky color.”

“Okay, okay! Fine, I get it!”

I couldn’t deal with this anymore, so I just put on the white.



WE ENTERED THE ADVENTURERS' MEET WITH MY STEPDAUGHTER —

And so we headed for the skills-review tournament reception at the entrance to the grove.

There was a whole crowd of adventurers there, like when the population density of a more rural town drastically increases for an event.

“I believe I have told you already, but I will give you a quick review—the time limit for this tournament is three days. The party who has the most to show for their efforts in that time period is the winner. Ranking well means prize money and better ranks as an adventurer.”

Oh right, adventurers had an actual rank system besides the number rankings they got in their popularity contests. Things like B and C ranks...

“What’s your adventurer rank, Wynona?”

“S rank.”

Her answer came quickly.

“Uh, that’s gotta be the top rank, right? You really are a big deal...”

“No, all adventurers who get their names in This Adventurer Is Amazing! are S rank, so the letters don’t mean much at all. This fight is about how high up one can go within the S ranking.”

Sounds like an action manga with too much power creep...

“By the way, Miss Wynona, how do we win?” Laika asked a most reasonable question.

The parties weren’t fighting against one another, so it was hard to tell how we would be graded.

“How many powerful monsters we defeat, how many magic stones we gather

from those monsters, how many unusual items we collect, discovering and exploring yet-to-be-discovered caves, etcetera.”

That sounded sensible to me.

“And...relationships with fellow adventurers and guilds can influence your grade.”

Wynona glanced up—ahead of her was a crowd of people gathering around a party of female adventurers.

“Please look this way!”

“Pose with your sword!”

“Give me your game face!”

“You’re all cute; you’re all super cute!”

“Thank you so much; thank you so much!”

I knew that all the lady adventurers were good-looking and popular because of it, but there was something different about how people were fawning over them.

“Oh no, that is not what I want to experience...” Laika seemed already fed up with this whole thing.

Me too, Laika...

“Some female adventurers make a living off their popularity.” Wynona looked tired. “And they are still S-rank adventurers. They can slice a large wyrm to bits in ten seconds. One of them placed seventh in the newcomer division.”

“They sure sound powerful, even if they don’t look it!”

“That is why S rank is a given. One cannot make their way up as an adventurer without garnering more popularity or showing off overwhelming skill.”

“Man, being an adventurer is no picnic...” Much harsher than I thought it was. But every industry had an endless climb to the top and plenty of tough battles.

Then, somebody slid into view right in front of us—a thief, if my guess was correct.

Not a literal thief; I don't mean they're actually conducting robberies (usually). It's just an adventurer job, a specialist in undoing locks and disarming traps in dungeons. If adventurer thieves were actually stealing from people, then we'd have to turn around and put out arrest warrants for the criminals...

"Excuse me, you're Wynona, right?!"

"Yes? I will be participating today with these two," Wynona replied calmly, as though all was normal.

All of a sudden, people started coming out of the woodwork!

"Good luck, Wynn timer!"

"We're rooting for you!"

"I'm in love with you! Really! Please marry me!"

"I'll stan you forever!"

"You'll be in the hall of fame in no time!"

"Can you pose like you're casting a spell?"

Oh god... This is so many people...

The one asking for Wynona's hand in marriage was a woman, by the way.

I guess you needed to be super popular to take first place in the newcomer division.

"The rest of Wynona's party, please look this way!"

"Strike a pose!"

Oh no, they're looking at us, too...

"Lady Azusa...rd, I don't know if I can handle this..."

Her face bright red, Laika hid behind me. That was par for the course for her.

"Oh, she's one of those shy types."

"I like it, though!"

"Yeah, just be yourself!"

"We don't mind a shy girl!"

Okay, I'm gonna cut to the chase: Shut up!

Meanwhile, there were some people sketching us with unbelievable vigor... They were skilled enough to put food on the table; they didn't need to be adventurers at all...

"That dragon-girl looks super cool, too!"

"She has close ties with the dragons?"

"She looks so dignified."

"Please look this way!"

They were concentrating on me, now. Our whole party was getting scrutinized.

"I mean, as long as it's not a blue dragon."

"Blue dragons traumatized me..."

"One bit me once..."

Blue dragons had a terrible reputation wherever you went!

"Are you two dragons sisters or something?"

"Yeah, you seem really close."

"Yes! I-I'm the younger one!" Laika replied, her voice high-pitched and excited.

I guess I did look like the older one when we stood next to each other.

After that, Laika and I got so many questions it was kind of hard to keep up with.

"The adventurers Wynona picks must be powerful! I hope you don't mind us watching your careers from now on!" someone also said. We were like newcomers to an idol group.

But Wynona remained firm and said, "We have yet to finish preparations. Would you mind leaving us be?" And everyone obediently scattered.

Everyone had good manners when it came to that stuff. Maybe there was an unwritten rule like *Bothering the idols doesn't make you a real fan*.

“The adventuring industry sure has changed... I think it was more normal three hundred years ago...”

“Perhaps. The adventuring industry has been groping around for a defined form for a long time, and I believe this is what they’ve settled on. The industry cannot grow if they are known only as those shady individuals grumbling in taverns.”

I guess the popularity of the female adventurers also helps with the industry’s grungy image...

Still, I thought it was extreme.

“Please do not worry; we will not be receiving any more adulation of that nature. We will simply be clearing the grove as adventurers.”

“That’s a relief... I feel like we’ll be able to get good work in, if that’s the case.”

Laika and I would draw way too much attention if either of us did our absolute best, after all, and that wouldn’t be good.

Wynona had really only asked us to join so that we’d fill out her numbers anyway. She never said anything about putting us to work. Wynona herself was a fine adventurer in her own right, so that was obvious.

The staff came around to announce that we’d be starting in five minutes. It was almost time.

Wynona turned to look at me and Laika. “Finally, I have one word of warning for the both of you. In this tournament, adventurers are not expected to fight among one another. If you do, it is not subject to evaluation.”

Adventurer-hunting wasn’t allowed, basically.

“However—if things do come to blows, then dealing injuries is allowed, and no more. It is possible that a party or two out there is looking to pick fights. Be careful.”

“Oh, sure. I doubt that’ll be a problem.”

I wasn’t planning on starting any fights myself, and whether we got involved basically came down to random chance. But if anyone came after us, I would put them in their place.

“And one other thing—our objective during this tournament.”

“Yeah, we haven’t heard anything about that yet.”

What were we supposed to do, specifically, during this whole thing? Well, as long as we stuck with Wynona, we’d be okay. We were just acting anyway.

“We will capture the unique elephant that is said to live somewhere in the grove. That is our greatest objective.”

“An elephant? Is that some kind of rare item?”

“It is called the chalk elephant—a beautiful, pure-white creature.”

My head fell in disappointment. “You just want to keep it as a pet for the color!”

“I am glad you understand, Stepmother. I wish to bring it home to my mansion,” she declared calmly. Wynona kept a lot of white animals in her mansion, and she apparently wanted more.

“All this for a new pet...”

“No, we will receive high marks if we can show the chalk elephant to the staff. That is why it will not be a problem.”

“Aren’t you lucky your hobbies and practical uses overlap?”

“Please let me know if you see any other white creatures. I will catch them.”

It really just sounded like she wanted more animals for her collection...

Then—the loud drum signaling the start of the tournament echoed throughout the entrance to the grove.

Adventurers poured into the sea of trees, but Wynona did not move right away.

She was the professional adventurer and our leader, so Laika and I waited, too.

“I see our strategy is to stand and wait at first to watch things play out,” Laika said, impressed.

“Rushing forward will only dirty our clothes.”

“So you *do* worry about dirt on your clothes!!”

“Dirty clothes implies a dirty heart. Refusing to wash can be a symbol of one’s contempt for others. If an acquaintance of yours shows up to your meeting spot wearing soiled clothes, do you not feel insulted?”

“You sound like the headmistress of a super-strict school...”

But Wynona started casting something. “O wondrous white, keen white, piercing white, selfless white!”

That was also an incantation I wasn’t familiar with. Didn’t she just make it up, though?

A film of faint light seemed to envelop our party. “There. Now dirt and mud shall not get on us. Let us be off.”

“You sure have a lot of useful spells...”

“I learned it from the wizard slime, Wizly. She is said to be the first of her kind.”

“Ah, so Wizly was your mentor?”

I didn’t think there were any magic-using slimes out there besides Wizly. But if we counted spirits, then that would make Wynona the second.

“I came up with the incantation. Just so you know.”

“I knew it! There was too much about the color white!”

“There will be plenty of weaker monsters out there, but there is no real meaning in engaging with them. At most, we should dispatch them if they block our way.”

“Kay, got it, got it.”

We pushed our way into the grove with Wynona leading the way.

I say *push*, but thanks to that thin film of light, we didn’t get tired or feel any resistance from the grasses or the branches. It went really smoothly, actually.

“Hey, do you think you could teach this spell to your stepmom next time?”

There were some days I didn’t want to encounter any slimes, so it might be a

handy thing to have those times when I went out.

“I don’t mind, but it could be hard for a non-slime to learn.”

Was it weird to learn a slime-repellant spell from a slime spirit...?

“I’m thinking of this as special training on a real battlefield! I am bracing myself, but I am eager to show off the fruits of my daily training!” Laika was super enthusiastic about this.

I’ve got a feeling I’m the least excited out of all of us...

We concentrated on our survey of the grove, while Wynona drew a map of the areas that hadn’t been recorded before.

Mapmaking was part of an adventurer’s job, work that slowly expanded our knowledge of a world. There were still many places where no person had ever set foot.

In terms of battle, monsters did attack us, but Laika and I squared them away with a single hit. Or Wynona froze them with her magic.

No one was getting in our way, and while it was a little unclear whether we were actually bonding or not, we still made a fantastic party.

“Yep, I think I get now why being an adventurer is more like a sport or the idol industry,” I murmured, several hours into our expedition. “Dungeons that don’t have any bosses to defeat or items to obtain are more boring than I thought...”

The core of our job was to make a map, which was one part of an adventurer’s work that gave their labor meaning in the real world. Just delving into long-abandoned ruins and getting items didn’t really benefit society.

Which meant that all we could really do now was patiently keep on walking. Kind of an empty job for an adventurer, hence all the promo and fanfare...

Wynona must have agreed because she nodded.

“Here in the grove, this is not exactly easy. Weak parties would have to immediately retreat from any encounters. But for S-rank adventurers, this is essentially nothing more than a walk around the block.”

A world without bosses was really hard for adventurers.

Just like she said, the farther we went in, the more parties we encountered who had been injured or forced to quit.

“Ooh! I hurt my bad knee, again...”

“I threw out my arm throwing too many rocks!”

“I can’t believe my chronic back pain is flaring up now!”

Wait, if you’re old enough to have chronic back pain, then maybe you should switch careers?!

“It sure sounds like a lot of them quit without ever coming across a monster,” I remarked once we passed the adventurer with the back pain.

“Indeed. Conditioning is crucial in order to work as an adventurer for a long time. Quite a handful of promising adventurers suffer injuries.”

“It really is a lot like sports...”

“That adventurer we just passed with an arm injury is also somewhat well-known. He threw one hundred and fifty stones a day over five straight days.”

Isn’t that about the number of pitches a high school baseball player could throw...?

“The adventuring world is full of hardships, isn’t it, Lady Azusa?”

She didn’t use my fake name, but fortunately there weren’t any other adventurers around us to hear.

“Yeah, there are way more things you need to think about than I thought. I was expecting more people just doing their own things. Like hanging out in taverns and getting drunk as soon as the sun set.”

Maybe it was just a preconception of mine, but my image of adventuring was a tavern near the guild where everyone was ready to brawl at the drop of a hat.

“That’s the older image, from back when adventurers were required for all different kinds of situations.”

We weren’t so much actively clearing the grove but more listening to Wynona’s explanations and learning as we moved around.

“As functional divides grew and specialists appeared, the regular people could

no longer rely on adventurers who acted as jacks-of-all-trades. In the past, people had no choice but to gather adventurers when a horde of monsters attacked their towns, but now they can detect these things ahead of time, gather their armies, and prevent it from happening.”

“I guess that’s more trustworthy than a gang of unfamiliar adventurers all lumped together, huh.”

It’d be checkmate for the town if they relied on adventurers who never showed up...

“In addition, one of the main requests adventurers received was to find missing persons, but now larger cities have specialized investigators for that sort of thing.”

So the division of labor in society had permanently changed the amorphous title of *adventurer*.

The sun was starting to set, so we decided to set up camp around a large hollowed-out tree. We caught some grove rabbits, fried them, and ate them. Pretty tasty.

Wynona, meanwhile, had brought her own pillow and blanket. She sure was particular when it came to some things...

Laika and I piled up some large leaves to wrap ourselves in and use as blankets. We were in the south, so it wasn’t all that cold.

Wynona also wiped the leaves clean with a damp cloth. She wanted to keep any hazards that would dirty our clothes at a minimum.

At this point, she was basically a strict, fastidious mother... Our roles had been reversed...

Laika quickly fell asleep. She wasn’t exactly the type to get tired on a journey; it was more like she had worn herself out spending all this time in a new environment.

Laika was powerful, but she didn’t have that brash mindset that often came with it. On the other hand, I don’t think I’d be able to handle it if she was like Flatorte, so I’d rather she stayed the way she was.

“Hey, Wynona, are you up?” I asked Wynona, who lay beside me in a proper white blanket.

“Yes, Stepmother. I am awake.” She was lying squarely on her back, so I couldn’t see her face.

“Why did you become an adventurer?” I asked directly.

Adventurers nowadays needed a lot of self-discipline in order to get anywhere. If you just tried to jump in because you couldn’t handle a job with more structure, you wouldn’t be able to survive.

Why did Wynona choose to be an adventurer?

All I could hear was an exasperated sigh.

Haughty was her default mode...

“Because adventurers can live life alone.”

I didn’t hear any grief in her voice, but it sounded a little sad to me.

“When I was born, the only person I could communicate with was the Great Slime. Without any assets, history, or anything else, the easiest path for me to take and find a life within the culture was to establish myself as an adventurer.”

Even if I wasn’t the reason she came to life in this world, she still had to take care of everything on her own.

I thought that was way easier than being a corporate wage slave, but some people might be at a loss as to what to do.

“Just as I told you today, it is not easy becoming a top-rate adventurer. However, once you attain that status, you can live in beautiful abodes like my mansion. Success can earn you a lot of money.”

“You don’t need to mention that; it kinda kills the magic.”

“Don’t you want to hear about my salary?”

“Nope.”

Well, one thing hasn’t changed about being an adventurer—you can come from nothing and be hugely successful.

“And it goes without saying that the work itself is fun,” Wynona said, her voice clear. “Though one must battle constantly with oneself, I much prefer it to having someone decide everything for me.”

“Yeah, I totally agree.”

I kept letting other people choose for me, and before I knew it, I was being forced to do something that was essentially slave labor, and then all that work killed me...

But there was something I had to make sure was said.

“Wynona, you’re not alone—”

“Ah, no cheese for me, thank you.”

She knew exactly what I was going to say! Yikes, that reply was really embarrassing...

“In the end, humans and spirits are alone. Not even slimes can absorb other slimes and become the all-slime or anything.”

But I actually experienced that thanks to Godly Godness... Although that was like a game world... It wasn’t reality...

“I expect great things from you again tomorrow, Stepmother.”

“Yeah, I got this.”

I could tell that Wynona was starting to open up to me, so all in all, it was a good day.

“Oh, by the way, who’s taking care of all the white pets you have at home?”

Adventurers often left their homes unoccupied for a long time.

“Grand Duke Polar Bear is taking care of them, so they’re all right.”

“Your polar bear is?!”

Bears were pretty smart, sure. But—

“If your polar bear’s a grand duke, doesn’t that make it of higher standing than you, a margrave?”

A duke was clearly above any kind of count or countess! But I guess people

named their pets King and all that, so maybe it didn't matter.

"The Grand Duke is white all over, unlike me, so of course he's of higher standing."

"You really stick to your guns, don't you...?"

I bet her pets were very happy with her.

"Grand Duke Polar Bear knows his position comes with the duty to protect my other pets, so he concentrates on his job."



I could imagine Grand Duke Polar Bear working hard at his job, and the mental image was kind of funny.

On day two, we continued our exploration.

My role was to gather samples of rare plants. Some could be useful for medicine, after all.

Since all the adventurers went into the grove at once, we did come across some other parties, but the frequency of it was clearly lessening.

“It seems more and more adventuring groups have quit. Or perhaps we have gone in quite deep.”

“Probably both, Laika. I doubt lower-level parties can go in this deep.”

We were so strong that we were kind of numb to it all, but the monsters and other creatures in the grove were powerful. Fierce lizards, snakes, and weirdly big bugs... A lot, basically.

To be honest, I considered packing up and going home when I saw a stink bug the size of a soccer ball, but Wynona froze and killed it.

“Do you see how the shell on this insect glitters? It sells for quite a high price for craft uses—tens of thousands of gold.”

“Huh, no kidding... I don’t really want to touch it, though...”

We discovered plants and animals that looked like they might be new species, created maps of unexplored areas, and managed to be productive overall.

Wynona was the one who tried to identify them and see if any of these things were new species.

“So you know enough to tell, huh. I’m a witch, so I can suss out a thing or two, but I have no way to tell if it’s a new species or not.”

“Every S-ranked adventurer knows these things, of course. People will even treat you poorly if you don’t.”

“This industry really is rough... You’re all practically researchers...”

If a person wanted to be an adventurer for a long time, they had to contribute meaningfully to society while also gaining popularity.

I bet it was easy to make a ton of money by that point, but maybe only one in a hundred—one in a thousand—actually made it that far.

Wynona didn't strike me as an adventurer when I first met her, but now I could tell she was perfectly suited to this field in the modern age.

Laika, being Laika, squared away large basilisks with a single punch, showing off her full strength without remorse.

"I'm moving much better today. It is far easier to strike certain points while in human form. I think I will be able to improve if I can make the best use of my human and dragon forms when they're most appropriate."

"You don't truly need to get any stronger, do you? You would be able to feed yourself for the rest of your life as an adventurer."

Wynona was astonished at how powerful Laika was. I bet Laika could easily be ranked S, too.

That night for dinner, Wynona found a fruit that had pure-white pulp inside when you peeled it.

"It is not poisonous, so no need to worry."

"I'm impressed with how well you can manage even when you're obsessed with the color white..."



And then, day three.

Our yield wasn't bad at all, so we decided to head back to the grove entrance where reception was.

An amateur like me had no idea what our grade would be, but Wynona's expression told me that we easily had enough to pass.

"Thank you so much, both of you. I may be able to get first place in the general rankings of This Adventurer Is Amazing! next year thanks to you."

"That'd make you the most powerful adventurer, then, huh? That's pretty cool."

It wasn't easy to make it that far without the right stuff.

“Ah, I am not sure if I’ll be the most *powerful*. Without the right factors that gain others’ votes, then one cannot reach first place. Power alone is not enough.”

“All that stuff’s too confusing!”

I guess if they were ranking people based on pure strength, then they could just hold a traditional tournament or something.

“If there is one thing I find regrettable, it is that we were unable to find the chalk elephant, I suppose.”

“Hey, you’re right. We didn’t see the elephant at all.”

I’d thought that we’d at least catch a glimpse of something as big as an elephant as we wandered the grove for three whole days, but nothing.

“We did not even see any crushed plants, so it might be by the water’s edge,” Laika said. As a large creature herself, she knew her stuff.

Wynona appeared to be thinking for a while before she finally said, “Then before we leave, let us do that. We can follow the river out of the grove, I believe.”

And so the three of us took a bit of a detour on our way out—and it was a big success.

The second we came out by the river, we discovered exactly what we were looking for.

The elephant was drinking!

“Wynona, there it is!”

“There is no room for doubt! This is the chalk elephant!”

Wynona was the most excited she’d been these three days. She approached the elephant and gazed up at it. The poor thing seemed a little annoyed.

The chalk elephant was a bit smaller than the elephants I’d seen at the zoo. Maybe it evolved that way to have an easier time among all the trees.

Wynona started taking notes on the elephant’s mode of life. I guess observing animals was part of her job, too, and she was doing her due diligence. But I

assumed that once she was done taking notes, she was probably going to try and pull it out of here.

I was wrong.

“Chalk elephant, do you have a family?” she asked, although I doubted it could understand speech.

I could feel my heart clench.

She wasn’t seizing everything she saw that was white and taking it home. She wasn’t going to drag a creature away from its own home and family. At least, that’s how I took it.

Or maybe Wynona wasn’t conscious of it, since she lived alone.

The elephant’s trunk curled into the form of a question mark.

They were communicating, somehow!

“I see you don’t quite understand my words. Shall I look around for other elephant tracks, then?”

Then, we heard the clinking sound of metal scraping against metal—a sure sign of human presence.

Before us appeared a group of three, all wearing black armor.

“You are the Black Knights!”

Wynona yelled.

So these were the Black Knights, the first-place newcomer party. Wynona wasn’t kidding when she said they were in all black. Their faces were even hidden behind their helms; I almost mistook them for living-armor demons or something...

“Ah, what a coincidence to come across you here, Wynona. Perfect timing,” one of the masked people murmured. I could tell from the tension between them that this wasn’t a friendly encounter. “I would like to offer my thanks for making a fool of us when you turned down my proposal.”

Whoa, hey, that sounds like fightin’ words!

“Stepmother, Laika, even if it does not happen in public, adventurers do

attack one another behind the scenes. I have been targeted a handful of times in the past.”

Even as the adventuring world got more and more institutionalized, some of the dirty parts stuck around.

“I will never forget the hatred I felt for you when you turned down our invitation to join the Black Knights. Such contempt! ‘Ugh,’ you said, ‘if I were to be forced together with you disgusting individuals who embrace such a color, I would much rather work with brown cockroaches. The color of your armor is already enough of a joke; do not involve me. Do not enter within a thirty-*gilro* radius of me. If you do, I will notify the police. Why not jump into a swamp of sulfuric acid and bleach yourselves? Go on, then, leave.’ I remember every single word you said to me!”

I wouldn’t blame them for attacking her!

“Wynona!! You’re awful! That’s a terrible thing to say to someone!”

“Such an excellent memory would be better suited to memorizing the scripture of your deity of choice. Though I am certain any deity worshipped by you aesthetically challenged fools must be similarly horrifying. Oh, I feel as though my clothes will darken if I continue talking to you, so please step away from me.”

And she was going for the fight, too!

“Lady Azusa, I see adventurers remain as hot-blooded as they have always been.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right... And, Laika, remember to call me Azusard here.”

Luckily, the Black Knights were only interested in Wynona, so they weren’t listening to us. The other two stepped forward, flanking the one who had spoken.

“I will not allow this girl to treat us this way. What sort of education did her parents give her?!” The voice sounded like an older woman.

None, actually.

“I’ve known your pitch-black armor was ugly from the moment I was born.

From *before* I was born.”

I guess de-escalation wasn’t Wynona’s style.

This time, the last of the Black Knights removed his helm and stepped forward. “I will not stand for this anymore!” It was a middle-aged man.

The second adventurer removed her helm, too, and just as her voice implied, she was a middle-aged woman.

The Black Knight who first spoke to Wynona then removed his helm. It was a young man of about twenty years old, who looked similar to the older man next to him. Wait, did that mean...?

“The Jozit family will not remain silent after such mockery! As the father, I will take on this fight!”

So they *were* a family! They were adventuring together!

“Ah, I remember Jozit. He was an adventurer who married another adventurer twenty years ago. His results began to drop, and he subsequently retired. I see you are hiding your face and giving it another shot as a newcomer.”

“Precisely. I cannot win against the young adventurers, and there are relatively few enemies in the newcomer party division, so I hoped an odd duck with his face covered could get into the top ranks.”

He sure was strategic for the most trivial stuff!

“I also chose this color to establish my character.”

“And the dirt doesn’t stand out, so cleaning it is easy,” his wife added. Rational decisions all around.

“So you have no sense of beauty. Fashion is not simply something you wear for its convenience or the attention of others. You must dress to display your convictions! You owe the god of fashion an apology!”

“What? There’s a god of fashion? But we weren’t even talking about fashion in the first place!” I exclaimed.

We’re all adventurers here; don’t get that mixed up.

“Ultimately, fashion is only temporary,” said the wife. “When you’re young, you can dress for acclaim as you go on your exploits, but as you get older, you eventually settle on the safer options. When you reach my age, you just look pitiful in what you used to wear as an adventurer.”

What a strange thing to get hung up on...

“As for me,” said the husband, “I like to lie around the house naked once I’m out of the bath! I gave up on fashion years ago!”

Too much information, dude!

“I am always telling you to put on some clothes after your bath,” said the wife. “At least take some inches off your tummy first.”

Yeah, I don’t think that’ll happen...

“What’s more important than fashion is love—familial love! We work hard now for our son. We do wish he chose a more stable profession, but since we were both adventurers in the past, we couldn’t say no.”

“That’s why we decided to form a party and fight together—we want our son to grow up to be a respectable adventurer in his own right!”

They were a bunch of weirdos, but there was nothing wrong with a family like this...

“That’s right. With my mom and dad, I’m gonna shoot for the stars! We’ll get top ten of the general rankings!”

“That’s not the stars!” I interjected before I could stop myself. “At least try to aim for top three!”

“Miss dragon, we’re a bit of an oddity—getting top ten in the general rankings is amazing enough as it is. Noteworthy, even.”

Oh right, I’m wearing my horn headband. Phew, at least no one’s figured out I’m not really a dragon.

“The point is! I will never forget such humiliation. I will defeat you all and take away everything you’ve accomplished here in the grove!”

“Yeah! I’ll fight for our son!”

“I will, too! I’ll give this another go... I’ll even try dieting again!”

Honestly, please stop giving me info I didn’t want to hear!

“Sigh...”

Wynona’s sigh was full of contempt.

“Very well. I will crush you. After I’m done with you, just seeing the color white will leave you trembling in terror.”

So you’re going to completely destroy their lives, then.

“We will win this battle!”

The young adventurer was probably pretty strong, but I wondered where all this confidence was coming from.

“When we work as a family, our strength is complete. But you, Wynona—you have no family, and you live alone. That’s what makes us different!”

I honestly wondered what kind of logic that was, but—there was a look of displeasure on Wynona’s face. She had a lot of displeased expressions, but this one was different. It was almost like he hit a nerve.

“Is there a problem with not having a family?”

She had her hands balled into fists—she was angry.

Wynona wasn’t really interested in having a parent-child bond with anyone. She’d usually say, “I would much rather have money than anything like that.”

But of course, she wasn’t happy to hear someone say out loud to her that she had no family. She’d never had a family. She was a slime spirit—she popped into existence somewhere in the Great Slime’s forest.

The Black Knight family wouldn’t know about that, though, and they probably didn’t mean any harm, but Wynona was definitely irritated by the subject.

“Margrave Wynona of Idell, I know your rotten personality has estranged you from your parents and brothers and sisters. Plenty of quirky people end up as adventurers, but none of them are as warped as you!” the young knight continued.

He was kind of right, at least in terms of her rotten personality... No, wait, I shouldn't be happy about this...

“And we will not fight like you! We will strike back with our family’s perfect formations! Formation five!”

The Black Knights then stepped deftly into place, surrounding Wynona.

“Behold, a family’s economical movements! Prepare yourself, Wynona!”

“Oh—honey, that’s your spot for formation seven.”

“Crap. I got them backward!”

Maybe they had economical movements, but there was no point if they didn’t remember them correctly!

But they’d definitely knocked Wynona off her game.

A mage would have to immediately start casting, but she now had the enemy both in front of her and behind her. If she had a spell ready to knock them all back, she could turn this around—but she didn’t, and she couldn’t.

“What? You may attack me as a family, but you are still not my enemy!”

“Fine, but can you block us from all directions?” asked Knight Dad. He and his wife were fairly experienced adventurers.

“You have met your match, Wynona, and you will soon see it!”

The Black Knights all moved to attack Wynona at once.

“She has a mother!”

I immediately went to stand in front of Wynona.

“I am Wynona’s mother, Azusard, the adventurer! Ready for battle!”

The Black Knights froze. “You—When did you...get there...?” Knight Mom was stunned.

Oh-ho-ho, wait till you see my stats, lady.

“You’re her mother? But you’re so young...? Maybe it’s a complicated situation...?”

Knight Dad was more surprised by a less relevant detail...

I glanced back at Wynona and smiled. "I'll go for the parents; you go for the kid. So everyone's picking on someone their own size."

"...A-all right, Mother...step."

I was delighted when she forgot to add the *step* part, but she tacked it on at the end anyway.

"All right, here we go!"

I got up close to Knight Dad and pulverized his armor as easily as I would a piece of paper. I just grabbed the neck part and yanked. It was the first time in almost three hundred and twenty years that I'd been reminded of that craft project I made entirely out of aluminum cans. In my past life, I guess it'd be a little weird thinking about the years, though.

I'd kill somebody if I attacked with all my might, so...I had to be careful...

"Bwuh?! What superhuman strength... No, is this an illusion...?"

Unfortunately, this was reality. I could use magic, but physical attacks were a lot easier.

"May as well keep you from attacking while I'm at it, huh?" I twisted Knight Dad's sword. "Weapons are dangerous, so you're not allowed to use them anymore."

I dashed toward Knight Mom next and bent the tip of her sword straight down. The better you are with the sword, the worse it is not to have one.

I then indented her armor a little bit with a double-handed push.

"Ah! My waist barely fits in this, and now it's pinching! Owww!"

Wasn't expecting emotional damage from this fight! I guess that was good enough to keep stepmom out of this in the meanwhile.

How was Wynona doing?

The young knight, his sword drawn, was headed straight for Wynona.

Yes, this was the right strategy. No point in making him panic.

“Prepare yourself, Wynona!”

“Prepare myself? No thank you,” Wynona said as she deftly danced out of Knight Boy’s rushing path.

She was still so cold and unwelcoming, even at times like this. But if you think of it another way, it meant she was levelheaded again.

Now that the fight was one-on-one, the two were on totally different levels. She easily warded off all his attacks. Eventually, she began an incantation.

“No fiercer violence than the pure first snow! No act more terrifying than wanton destruction!”

Once she was finished, a magic circle appeared in the air right in front of her.

What came pouring out was a furious, pure-white blizzard!

“Aaaaargh!”

As he ran forward, Knight Boy took the blizzard head-on and stopped in his tracks.

“Hee-hee, how dingy you are. I shall make you like new-fallen snow.” She smirked. Still all about the white...

The middle-aged knights had already lost the will to battle, holding their hands up in surrender.

I’d call that a win.

“Incredible, Lady Azusa! Every movement was flawless!”

I gave up on trying to make Laika call me by my fake name... But—

“Yes, behold the power of Azusard the dragon! Azusard can crumple both armor and swords!”

—I was still going to insist on the name Azusard!

The Black Knights left us all the rare herbs that they collected as an apology and ran off.

I guess that settled that matter.

“I apologize for troubling you like this.” Wynona awkwardly bowed her head

to me. “They were no match for us, but I lost focus when we began arguing, which delayed my spell. I must defeat those types one by one as they come to me...”

“Oh, you can just say thanks. I’m still your mom, even if it comes with an extra ‘step.’” I ruffled her hair.

“Please do not play with my hair!” she complained, which was more or less what I was expecting.

“Well, even if we don’t live in the same house, you can still consider us your family. You aren’t alone.”

“I already have a family. You know, Grand Duke Polar Bear.”

“Of course, your pets are very special members of your family!”

That was a good point; her house was certainly lively, so maybe she wasn’t as lonely as I thought...

“But it is still true that you took care of me. Thank you, S...Mother.”

She looked away, but she didn’t tack on *step* this time. Just almost.

“I did what any mom would do.”

“If we must be mother and daughter, I would not mind playing along when it benefits me,” she said sullenly. But that was just part of her personality. I’d wonder what was wrong if she suddenly started acting all sweet like Falfa.

“Let’s go back to reception, then.”

“Um, Lady Azusa, we’re forgetting something!” Laika stopped me.

I looked back, wondering if I dropped something, but I realized what she meant.

The chalk elephant!

It wasn’t going to be easy taking this big boy back with us. But Laika could carry it on her back if she was in dragon form...

“Oh, we may leave the elephant as it is. I am not taking it home,” Wynona said lightly. So she hadn’t forgotten about it.

“Were you worried because it might have parents or children?”

If she was going to leave behind the elephant she’d been so fixated on before, then she’d had a considerable change of heart. The terrain and climate were nothing like her manor, either, so maybe she was thinking about that as well.

“No.” She waved her hand, showing me I was wrong. “The elephant is rather gray and dingy for a ‘chalk’ elephant... I no longer need it...”

“The wrong hue?! Really?!”



Afterward, we returned with a lot to show for our efforts, and the marks we got were quite high— And we placed first in the skills-review tournament!

To be honest, I wasn’t terribly surprised. I mean, the Black Knights basically handed us all their hard work. They attacked us first, so we didn’t feel too bad accepting it.

When the results came out, we found ourselves surrounded by other adventurers.

“Congrats, Wynn timer!”

“I’m going to sketch you, so please look this way!”

“Please make a cool pose!”

“I hope you get first overall!”

Wynona really was like an idol. Laika and I decided to support her from the sidelines.

But then people started coming to us, too.

“Congratulations, Azusard!”

“I hope you do well in your next endeavor!”

“Will you work as a trio again?”

Apparently, I had fans now...

But what was going on beside me was more terrifying.

“You were amazing, Laika!”

“You’re a red dragon, right?”

“I’ll make plans to go to a red-dragon hot spring on my next vacation!”

“I’ll vote for you next time!”

“Me too!”

“You definitely have my vote!”

I had no idea she’d get more of a crowd than Wynona...

No matter where Laika went, she was picture-perfect.

“Oh, no... I am not working as an adventurer all the time... This was simply a temporary arrangement...”

Laika was completely embarrassed, which was only attracting more fans. And she couldn’t pretend not to be affected by all this, so there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Wynona’s reaction was somewhat mixed.

“If Laika gets more votes than me, I will be a bit jealous.”

“You and Laika have different kinds of fans, so I think you’ll be fine...”



WE WENT TO THE DON BRACO PEACH FESTIVAL



It was my turn to make dinner that night.

“The girls won’t like it if I put in too many herbs, but I wish I could put in a lot~”

I tossed herbs into the stew, toeing the line that my daughters would tolerate. These herbs weren’t for taste but more as a substitute for vegetables.

After that, I defrosted some of our stock of boar meat and cooked it up, then poured a whole bunch of special sauce over it to get rid of the gamy taste. Around here, we couldn’t just get whatever we wanted at a grocery store, so our meals were generally rough. But I always made sure they tasted as good as they could.

Still, it was delightful to have time to cook in the first place. When I was a corporate slave, I *only* ate out... And not at fancy restaurants, just the chain joints that were open late into the night... The people working there started to recognize me...

Then, the door opened, and Halkara and Laika came in.

Laika would usually take Halkara back and forth between Nascúte, where Halkara worked, and here. But sometimes, it was Flatorte who took her. They took turns, much like we took turns making our meals.

“I’m home~”

“Another smooth flight today, Lady Azusa.”

This was fantastic—Halkara was home much earlier than usual. People really only needed to work about six hours a day. Maybe even less.

“Hello, welcome back, you two~ ...Hmm? What’s that letter you got there?”

Halkara was holding something, probably sent to the Halkara Pharmaceuticals factory.

“You’re very sharp, Madam Teacher. I was just about to tell you what this is.”

Halkara came into the kitchen to explain, then pulled the piece of paper out from the opened envelope.

“Around this time of year, the elves of the Nobleleaf Village hold their festival. They sent me an invitation.”

“Noble-leaf? Elf place names sure are unique... Is that a part of the Wellbranch Marquessate, too?”

Halkara’s hometown was a part of the Wellbranch Marquessate, which was in Hrant Province.

“No, Nobleleaf Village is in Ontos Province, which is a bit to the south. To an elf, that’s an entirely different country. Our connection is not very strong.”

In elf society, if someone lived in a different forest, they were basically foreign.

“See, I just opened a factory in my hometown in Hrant, right? That is how information about other elves in Hrant got to the factory in Nascúte.”

Halkara had closed her factory in her homeland of Hrant before, but once she made amends, she had reopened operations there.

“So what kind of festival is Nobleleaf Village holding?”

That was the most important point.

“The Don Braco Peach Festival.”

“The *Donburako* Peach Festival? Momotaro?!”

Donburako was a weird Japanese word for the sound of a peach floating down a river. It had absolutely no use outside of that, so it was kind of a waste of a word.

And I couldn’t think of anything else besides the folktale of Momotaro that featured a scene of a peach floating down a river. Maybe there was one in myth or fairy tales from other countries, but I doubted they had a word like

donburako to go along with it.

“What is a momotaro? Don Braco is a festival that reveres a hero from Nobleaf myth. He was said to have come from the village of Braco.”

“So he’s a good man from Braco! Still, Don Braco makes him sound really important...”

Titles and standings changed all the time depending on the era, so it was hard to tell what the title of *don* actually meant, but he must’ve been a noble of some kind.

“He is a legendary figure, so it was given to him more or less at random~ It is said he was born from a peach, after all~”

“He *is* Momotaro!”

If you told me to name any myth where someone was born from a peach, the only answer I’d have for you would be Momotaro.

“Please, what is a momotaro?”

But of course, no one knew the tale in this world.

“Well, I’m not surprised you wouldn’t know the story of Don Braco,” said Halkara. “The legend is told in only one region of the elf lands, Madam Teacher. I will tell it to you now.”

“Sure. I’ll listen while I cook.”

It’d be perfect for a bit of background noise.

“Now, let me tell the story of Don Braco. My, this brings back memories~ I first heard this story from an old lady who used to live in my neighborhood.”

Just like a folktale.

“Once upon a time, a long time ago, there lived a peach couple in a village called Braco.”

“Wait!”

“What, Madam Teacher? Please don’t stop me when I’ve barely gotten started. You will ruin the flow.”

Sorry, but the question I had about the setting *was* right at the beginning...

“What do you mean by peach couple? Like, two peach trees living as husband and wife?”

In my mind, I pictured two clothed peach trees standing next to each other.

“The version I was told is about two peach fruits as husband and wife. Only peaches lived in the village of Braco.”

“But peaches can’t even eat, let alone get married. The only reason the trees would exist to get married is because of the pits in the fruits, right?”

“I honestly do not know what to say when you complain about all the details~ Please don’t get so caught up in them; it is just a legend.”

Well, the original Momotaro tale had a lot of weird issues, too, so I’d keep quiet.

“And so the wife went to the river to do the laundry.”

Exactly like Momotaro.

“There, she found water flowing through the river.”

“Obviously!” *I could’ve guessed that myself!*

“Why must you say that? The river must have been dried up, but she found it mysteriously full of rushing water when she went to clean their clothes.”

“Then why did she go there to do laundry at all?”

The first time you hear a myth or a fairy tale, there’s always a worrying number of bizarre issues...

“You are much too particular, Madam Teacher. It is what it is, all right? But then, around that time, the peach husband went to the mountain, where he was sadly eaten by a human. Poor thing...”

Oh, so this story had humans in it...

“The wife was sad her husband had been eaten—but it turned out they had been blessed with a child! A cute baby peach had been born!”

A peach emerging from another peach... Really weird mental image. But the

weirdness didn't stop there.

"There are no elves at all... There's only been peaches so far."

"Yes, and the baby peach grew quickly into a fine elf."

"That sounds like an eventful childhood!"

There must've been a mage who appeared and turned the peach into an elf; otherwise, it would be super weird.

"Please, Madam Teacher, refrain from making any commentary. This simply is how the story is supposed to be."

Does plants-turning-into-elves make sense to elves?

"The elf became a hero, and people began to call him Don Braco. He lived happily ever after."

"Right, so it's all normal after that—wait, at least tell me what he did!"

She totally skipped over the part I was most interested in!

"There are several different versions. Some tell of Don Braco defeating the melons, one speaks of how he developed his homeland by turning peaches into a local specialty, and one tells of how Don Braco worked with a peach and apple coalition to take down pears in battle."

"Wait, that second one—was he just pimping out the peaches?"

Weren't all the residents of Braco peaches...?

"*The Peach Garden Vow*, the one where Don Braco takes a vow of brotherhood with his confidants, the apple and the grape, is the most popular. That tends to be the only one that ever gets the stage adaptations."

"That whole concept is a mess!"

You've got humanoid versions of an apple and a grape, yet they're spending all their time in a peach garden? So they're being watched by hundreds of peaches?

"Oh, Madam Teacher. I'm repeating myself at this point, but it is nothing more than a child's tale, so please don't take it seriously. An elf would never be born from a peach, and it makes no sense that an apple and grape would act as

his underlings. They seem so weak in comparison.”

That put an end to the conversation, but this whole story was a little *too* out there, even if it was just for kids...

As Halkara told me the story of Don Braco, the stew reached a comfortable simmer.

“By the way, do they sell a lot of peaches at this festival?” I asked, bringing us back to where this all started. I was way more interested in that.

“Yes. It’s just full of peaches. They hold a championship to see which peach looks most like a butt.”

“Wow, now that’s something I don’t care about.” Was she purposely bringing up the stupidest bits of information? “I want to go if we can have some peaches, though. Falfa and Shalsha would love it.”

I could see them gleefully running around. Great chance for all of us to eat some peaches, too.

“Then we should go to the festival. If we take Miss Laika and Miss Flatorte, then we should reach Nobleaf Village over in Ontos Province in no time at all.”

“Yes, I would like to go, too!” Laika called from the dining room. Apparently, she had heard the whole conversation about the peach festival and was fascinated by the idea. I bet she was envisioning peach-flavored sweets. She liked meat, but she also liked sugar. Most girls liked both.

“By the way, do you know the story about Don Braco, Laika?”

“No, this is the first I’ve heard of it. Shalsha may know of it.”

Maybe it really was just a tale passed down among elves.

“I overheard a bit,” Laika said, “but there were no elf characters besides Don Braco, were there?”

She found an inconsistency that even I hadn’t noticed.

When we told everyone about the peach festival over dinner, I saw Falfa’s and Shalsha’s eyes sparkle.

“Peaches are so yummy! Falfa loves them!”

“It has long been said that peaches have warding effects. This would mean that Don Braco, the elf born from a peach, is a holy figure. Shalsha also loves peaches.”

Shalsha gave a serious analysis of the story, but to her mother, the affirmation that she liked peaches was much more important.

Flatorte was on board, too. “I’m going to enter the eating contest!” A dragon would be a formidable opponent...

“Miss Flatorte, there is no eating contest...” Halkara immediately corrected her before her hopes could get too high.

“What?! Then where will I compete?!”

Why did she think she was going to compete? I guess to her, everything was an opportunity for competition, even a peach festival.

The one who was least enthusiastic about all this was Sandra. She couldn’t eat peaches, of course, but that didn’t seem to be the reason why she was down.

“Peaches, hmm... They’re all so arrogant... I think they’re a bunch of jerks...”

Ah, the reviled snobbish types of the plant world...

“Peaches and chestnuts start getting all snooty around the age of three. Just three years. Three! Meanwhile, there are plenty of cedars that live for centuries. I wish they would learn a thing or two from persimmons. They don’t start talking about reaching midlevel until around eight years.”

I knew it meant something entirely different, but it reminded me of a saying about, like, something-something, three years for peaches and chestnuts, eight years for persimmons...

All that aside, we decided that the whole family would be going to the peach festival.

“Let’s eat all the peaches we can!” cried Falfa. She and her sister were overjoyed; there were no amusement parks in this world, so this was perfect for them.

And since we may as well go all the way with this, I extended an invitation to everyone I could—including Beelzebub the next time she came over. And she

came over often enough that it didn't take long.

"I shall be there if I can make it," she said, so that made it about fifty-fifty.



On the day of the peach festival, we arrived at Nobleaf Village.



There was a sign on the gate.

This was essentially a farm, so we weren't in a deep forest; this was a wide, flat plain with peach trees lined up as far as the eye could see.

And even though we were on flat land, we were still rather high up on a plateau. This was some pretty good altitude.

"This looks so different from the Wellbranch Marquessate," I said, recalling the complicated network of carriage lines that stretched across the region.

"Of all the elven lands, the Wellbranch Marquessate is the most urban. Nobleaf Village feels so rural in comparison~ I am a city girl." Halkara looked proud of that fact. Even to elves, the city tended to have a higher status.

"Don't elves need a forest of some kind? All I see are peach trees," Flatorte asked, curious. There was definitely an image that "forest equals elf."

"The elves of Nobleaf Village live in the surrounding mountains. This is a basin, so you'll find mountains if you go a short distance in any direction. Look, you'll see them."

Now that she mentioned it, I could see the green mountains; the plains didn't extend all the way to the horizon. It looked an awful lot like Japan. I'd never been to Yamagata or Nagano Prefecture, but maybe this was what the peach groves there were like.

"Let us go, then," said Shalsha. "There should be plenty of stalls selling

peaches.”

Falfa and Shalsha dashed off toward the event area before Halkara was even done talking.

They were faster and more enthusiastic than when they ran around the house in the highlands.

They *really* were ready to eat some peaches!

“Don’t get lost, okay~? Just be careful!”

“Okaaay!”

“Understood!”

It was a festival, after all, so all this running around was kind of a given. I just wanted them to have fun.

The two dragons seemed ready to jump into the fray, too.

“Halkara,” I said, “why don’t we all go off on our own to the places we want to?”

“Good idea. Nobleaf is in a rural area, so the festival area is not large enough for any of us to get lost.”

She sure was leaning into that city-girl superiority, huh...?

“Laika, let’s compete to see who eats the most!”

“No, it is much more meaningful to carefully appreciate the flavors of each dish. We shouldn’t treat it like a competition.”

“Then let’s compete to recommend the best peach food we find to each other!”

“I accept your challenge!”

After settling on a competition that was more feminine than I was expecting, the dragons hurried off, too.



THE BUTT-IFUL PEACH CHAMPION- SHIP

Vote for the peach
YOU think
looks most like a butt!



“I don’t think I can drum up *that* much excitement for this. I’m just gonna chill.”

I leisurely walked toward the festival grounds.

The first thing I spotted was—

—the stupidest thing!

Halkara was really waffling over which peach to vote for.

“Number three looks *most* like a butt, but it’s a bit tame. Number seven has *personality*.”

Oh yeah, she did mention that there was an event like this... I didn’t know she’d be this interested in it.

I ignored her and kept going...

The next thing I spotted was a big banner.

What were they doing here?

Elves were wearing armor and chanting, “Don Braco Tiger! Tiger!” I guess they were supposed to be dressed like Don Braco.

It was starting to sound like they were saying *Taiga*... It reminded me of the petitions people held back in Japan to make their local general into the main role of the Taiga dramas...

Yeah, there was always something weird about the festivals here...

I’d seen plenty of times how there was nothing fantasy-world-esque about the demons’ lifestyle, but Halkara’s hometown in the Wellbranch Marquessate had also had a twenty-first-century flavor to it with all those local not-bus lines everywhere. But maybe every variety of elf had a unique world view.

I went in farther to see a massive line in front of a temporary building.

Whatever this was sure was popular; every elf in line was male. Maybe they’d be racing while carrying a big peach or something.

There was a thick, black curtain hanging in front of the building with a sign right next to it.

“Can’t you do this somewhere more discreet?!”

Don’t put it near the front!

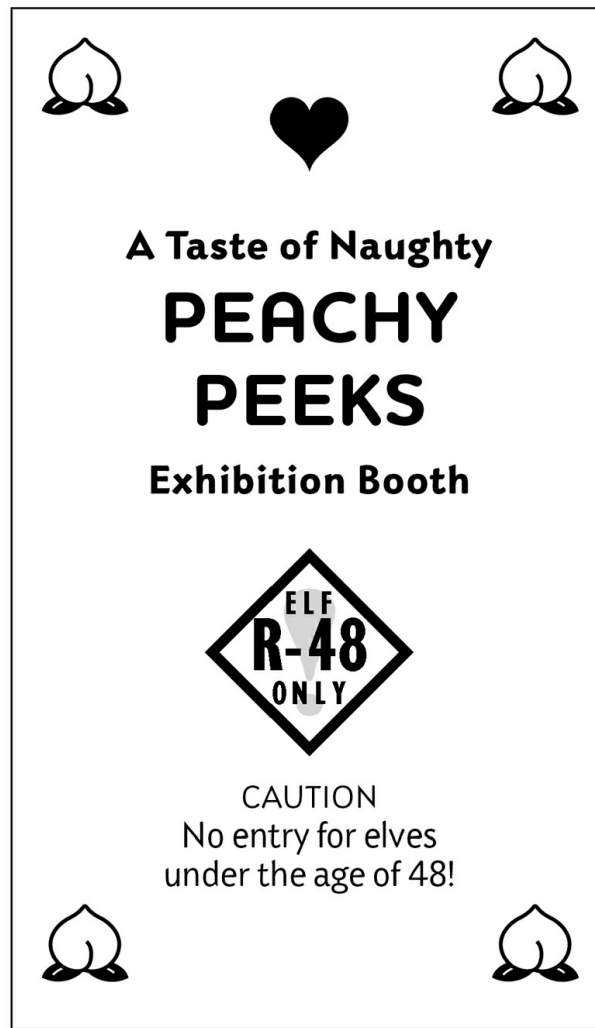
I know this festival is all about peaches, but now we’re even bringing real butts into it? Seriously?



NAME OUR TIGERS DON BRACO!

*We want our
province animal,
the Naph Tiger, to
be renamed the
Don Braco Tiger.
Please sign
our petition.*





Once I passed that sketchy zone near the entrance, the festival all finally came together with rows of stalls selling various peachy wares.

I also spotted Falfa and Shalsha sitting on a bench, eating. Peaches are always good no matter where you go.

I decided to go simple and buy a sliced peach—but there were still so many different types. I didn't know what to get.

Yikes, that product naming sense!

Were they really naming fruit products *grandma* and *grandpa*...? *Fresh and juicy* was not the image that brought to mind.

I bought Don Braco's Mother, which seemed to be the most standard.

I was handed a wooden bowl that had several cut slices of peach in it, along with a single wooden skewer stuck into one of the slices to serve as a toothpick.

I immediately put a slice in my mouth.

“Wow, it’s so good! You can always count on peaches to be delicious!”

So sweet and juicy! It was simple, but it had a graceful, refined sweetness—now *this* was what peaches should be like. I made the right choice.

I sat down next to Falfa and Shalsha.

“How is it? Is it good? Oh, I don’t need to ask.”

Both of them were euphoric. No one would they say it was bad with an expression like that.

Falfa was drinking the peach juice that had pooled at the bottom of her bowl. Oh, that stuff was good, too!

“Falfa is so happy! It’s like heaven!”

“This is utopia. Absolutely marvelous.”

“Isn’t it? I’m jealous they live in a place where they can pick such tasty peaches.”

Fruit production was not a perk of living in the area around the house in the highlands. Maybe we could try planting a peach tree near the house.

No... Sandra hates peaches, so we probably shouldn’t.

But now wasn’t the time for me to leisurely wander around and look at things.

DON BRAGG'S SON-IN-LAW

500
GOLD

DON BRAGG'S FATHER

350
GOLD

DON BRAGG'S MOTHER

300
GOLD

DON BRAGG'S BEST FRIEND

600
GOLD

DON BRAGG'S GRANDPA

500
GOLD

DON BRAGG'S GRANDMA

500
GOLD



COMPETITION!
How many
sour peaches can
YOU eat?

Not even the birds
or the bugs will eat
these super-sour
peaches. How many
can you fit in your
stomach?

GRAND PRIZE:
LIFETIME SUPPLY OF SOUR PEACHES



“Gyaaaaah!” That sounded like Flatorte screaming from far away.

“What’s she gotten herself into this time...? I’m going to take a look...”

I made my way toward the sound.

A dragon on a rampage would completely ruin an elf festival. If she needed to be stopped, it was my responsibility as head of the house to do so.

Phew, she’s just taking part in some event. What’s she doing?

I looked at the panel next to the stage.

“They have to fight through all that?!”

I didn’t think I’d ever seen a more unnecessary prize. I’d hate for that to show up on our doorstep.

“Uuugh... The sweeter I expect it to be when it hits my tongue, the nastier the sourness is afterward...”

Flatorte brought a slice to her lips with a look of pain. In a way, she seemed much more serious than usual.

The other competitors endured the sour peaches with puckered lips.

Why did these people enter anyway? That’s what I really wanted to know. They wouldn’t even get any fame from this.

“I will eat through the pain! If I lose, then I’ll be left with nothing but the sourness on my tongue! I will at *least* win!”

Is that really where she wanted to place her passion? Well, the peach farmers would be grateful for an event like this, where they could get rid of otherwise useless peaches.

I saw Sandra sitting in the audience.

Maybe this was more interesting to her, since she didn’t care about how any of the peaches tasted.

“Ahhh, peach dropouts. It’s tragic, really. Failing to make use of your status after being lucky enough to be born a peach—that’s more pitiful than living one’s whole life among weeds.”

Sandra always had some unique opinions...

“Hmm, I find myself less annoyed with peaches. There is cutthroat competition within the peach world. All they really need to do is struggle within their society to create even sweeter fruits, then give the best ones to the animals. Then they can get even better fertilizer.”

Hearing a plant’s perspective was making it harder to honestly think about how good they tasted. Eh, let’s just say everyone’s enjoying the festival in their own way.

Flatorte was still eating the sour peaches.

This was going to take a lot longer than I thought, so I decided to go somewhere else.

Beyond the food stalls, there was an exhibit on how they grew and harvested peaches.

I say *exhibit*, but there wasn’t much more than some text and diagrams; definitely not a place Flatorte would enjoy. I was thinking about giving this a pass, too.

But I found Laika there, examining the plaques.

She was such a good student! Too good for this world!

“Hmm, I see. And so that is how they make good peaches. I had no idea they undergo such strict inspection before getting shipped out... It takes more than I thought to preserve a brand.”

“You really are a hard studier, Laika.”

“Oh, Lady Azusa!”

She hadn’t noticed me approaching her at all.

“I bet the people who made this would be delighted to see you reading this so earnestly.”

“I have learned just how detailed the work process must be in order to preserve brand peaches. I am again reminded that I must not be conceited. Some of what I’ve learned here can be applicable to polishing my strength.”

“I’m really impressed that you can convert that into a warning for yourself...”

I tried to read some of the descriptions, but there were so many words, I gave up. A witch’s plant knowledge and a farmer’s plant knowledge were totally different. Witches didn’t know how to raise peaches.

“I’m leaving, Laika...”

“All right, Lady Azusa. I will be here a little longer, so please, go and enjoy yourself out there.”

I wasn’t sure who was the teacher and who was the apprentice anymore...

Just past the exhibit was what looked to be a relatively peach-free rest area. There were also a few stalls that had nothing to do with peaches, either. Maybe the spot was for people who were sick of the fruit.

Hmm, what to do? Guess I should go back to where all the peachy goodness was.

“Phew... This is the easiest place to be...”

I heard a voice coming from high up, and I found Rosalie floating nearby. She had her arms wrapped around her, like she was cold or something. Did ghosts get cold?

“Oh, Rosalie. You seem unwell; are you okay?”

She wasn’t zipping around in excitement, at least.

“Yeah, I’m fine... I guess places with lots of peaches aren’t for me. I start shaking and stuff...”

I remembered what Shalsha said. *“I’ve heard peaches have warding effects...”*

So they could drive away spirits.

The Japanese word for *paradise on earth* had *peach* in it, so maybe it really did have some holy element to it.

“I’ve just learned that places full of peaches aren’t exactly for me... What a relief to find this little spot.”

“Sorry, I did this to you, Rosalie... I wasn’t expecting this kind of problem...”

I hadn't even considered that this event would be bad for her. As a living person, there was so much I didn't know.

"No, don't worry about it, Big Sis. I'm still having fun. There's tons of people to talk with here, so I'm not bored at all."

People to talk to? Which means...

"Right now, I'm talking with a whole crowd of other ghosts who escaped."

"There's other ghosts here?!"

Well, as long as she had a way to pass the time.

"All right, then stick around here for a bit, okay? I think Laika's going to be hanging out with the exhibits for a little while longer."

"Got it, Big Sis!"

I decided to go back to the stalls again.

When I got there, I found a very unique-looking girl sitting in the market's eating area.

She was wearing a lot of white. Nothing but white.

Hey, is that...?

I walked around to get a look at her from the front, and sure enough—it was Wynona. I'd sent word to her about the event, and apparently it caught her interest.

"You're here, Wynona!"

"Ah! Please do not speak so suddenly to me, Stepmother."

"Uh, could you not call me that when we're around lots of other people?"

I only looked seventeen—elves were known for their youthful looks, but people were still turning quizzically toward us.

"But it is the truth, is it not, Stepmother?"

Don't do it on purpose! "What've you had to eat today, Wynona?"

She tended to only eat food that was white in color, after all. She had her preferences, and she really stuck to them.

“Peaches. That is essentially the only thing they sell here.” She was looking at me like I’d asked a stupid question.

“But I mean, peaches actually have color, right? Oh! You don’t actually eat only white foods—that’s a relief.”

“These are white peaches.”

“Never mind!”

“I will not eat *yellow* peaches.”

Oh, I’ll just let her do her thing. No one’s stopping her.

“By the way...” Wynona’s eyes darted around. “...Where are my sisters?”

Every time she saw Falfa and Shalsha, she would get nervous in the way a high schooler might around an older student she admired. Nothing like the borderline contempt she treated me with.

“They should be around there somewhere. Probably lined up for some stall—Oh, there we go.”

The two were in line to get some peach tarts, getting ready to pay.

When they turned around, they noticed me and came over.

“It’s Mommy and Sister Wynona~ ♪”

“Hello, Sister Wynona.”

They both called her *Sister Wynona* with the utmost respect... Maybe because Wynona looked older... The relationships around me were all way too bizarre and complex.

“Ah, I see you are in good spirits... Sisters...” Wynona froze up.

I wondered if there was some kind of emotional subtleties that only slime spirits could understand when it came to this stuff. *Mission successful!* I thought, and maybe it showed on my face, but I couldn’t tell you without a mirror.

Wynona never came to the house, so she rarely saw Falfa and Shalsha. She struck me as the type who wouldn’t come over without a reason. But that wasn’t too unusual.

My expectations had been influenced by Beelzebub, who would come over all the time for literally no reason. If anything, she was the unusual one.

But the peach festival was perfect. Anyone could come and go as they wanted. And maybe—or maybe not—run into the people who invited them, so it should have been an easy decision for Wynona.

“Do you want some peach tart, Sister Wynona?”

“No, I cannot so easily take things you offer to me, Sisters. I will treat you instead!”

That was a little weird, though.

“We hear a lot about your activities, Sister Wynona.”

“Oh, I’ve barely done anything. You, Sister Shalsha, are looking delightfully lovely today, as usual.”

Their way of giving compliments was all over the place. Wynona was the one living a more grown-up lifestyle, so that’s no surprise.

Anyway! They were having a friendly conversation, so I slipped away to find something else to do. Slime spirit bonding was a good thing.

I got in line for peach juice—100 percent pure. The good stuff.

But there was a person ahead of me in line who seemed familiar. As soon as she said, “Please give me the one with the juiciest droplets~” I was sure of who it was.

“You came, Momma Yufufu!”

“Oh, Azusa! I finally found you~ ♪”

Yep, I’d reached out to her, too.

“Well, now that I have, why don’t we have some mother-daughter alone time~?” she suggested just after I’d purchased my own juice.

“Yeah.”

It was nice to attend a festival as parent and child; I never got a taste of this when I was a kid. We sat down on a bench.

“How is life as a parent going?”

“I’ve got a stepdaughter now, so I’d say the difficulty went up a bit.”

“Ah~ I understand how you feel~”

“Do you really, Momma Yufufu?” That sounded like a classically insincere response. “It seems most of the people I reached out to ended up coming. But I haven’t seen the one most likely to show up yet.”

“I’m here, Elder Sister~”

I knew that voice right away—Pecora was jogging toward me.

I could see an exhausted-looking Beelzebub behind her. *Ah, chaperoning again. Fight the good fight.*

“Oh! If it isn’t Pecora~”

“Miss Droplet Spirit Yufufu, thank you for all your hard work on your magic stream. 🎵”

They started to greet each other. *Oh right, they knew each other because of the magic streaming...*

I was glad to hear that they were still getting even more and more unique networks.

“Elder Sister,” said Pecora, “let us line up for that peach stall over there!”

“I already had some.”

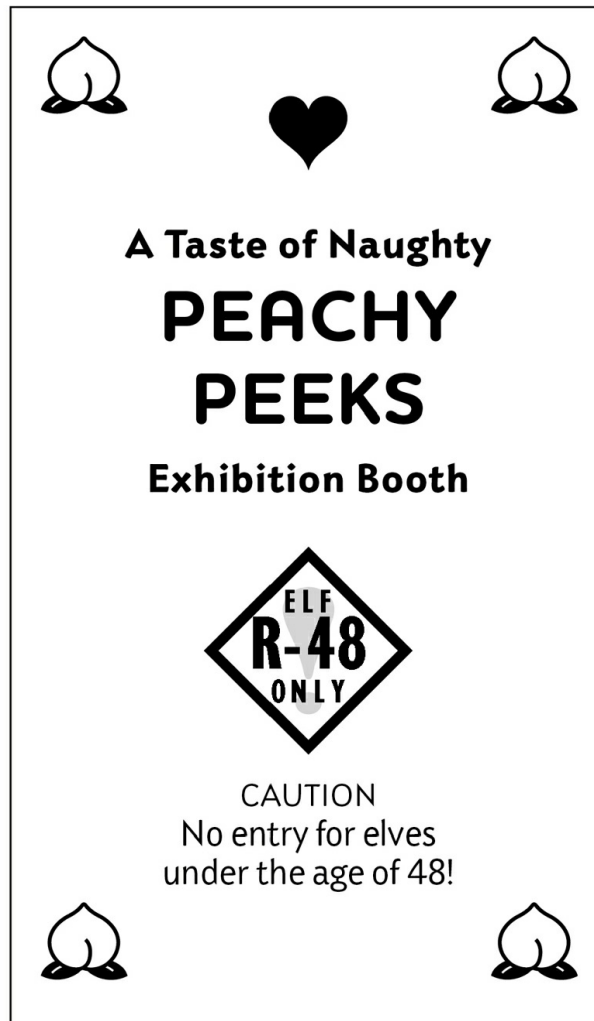
“Please play along with your younger sister,” she replied, yanking me to my feet.

Well, I guess I could just stand in line with her. I invited Momma Yufufu to come with me for a bit, too.

But Pecora ended up passing the peach stall.

“I want to know what’s in there, Elder Sister.”

“No! Definitely not! We’re going back!” I pulled Pecora away.



Why is she interested in the weirdest stuff?!

Everyone had their own fun at the peach festival that day, and I couldn't have been happier. It had the perfect amount of things to do and see in one day.

But...

"I don't think I need to eat any more peaches for a while...," I mumbled on our way back atop dragon Laika.

Almost every single stall sold peaches only, so I was sick of them now.

I ended up eating extra peaches since I went around the festival with Pecora, too. Demons sure eat a lot...

"I know~ I drank too much peach liqueur, so I think I've had all I can take..." Halkara sat behind me, her face pale.

"But that's how it always is with you!"

©Benio





KEEPING THE ANCIENT CIVILIZATION

COOL



Flatorte had been acting strange for the past few days.

“Eight hundred fifty-seven, eight hundred fifty-eight, eight hundred fifty-nine!”

She was doing sit-ups in the dining room.

“What are you doing? Into working out now? Or on a diet?”

Maybe 850 was normal for a dragon, but that was still quite a number. Once you get that high, you’re not just losing weight.

“Neither! Oh... I forgot my count...”

“Sorry! I shouldn’t have said anything!”

“It’s okay, Mistress. Not really keeping track of the numbers anyway. I’ve miscounted almost thirty times already.”

At that point, you might as well not keep count at all. But it’s easy to mess up once you get that high, to be sure.

“So what are you doing, then? I don’t think the floor is very clean.”

People usually wore their shoes inside in this world, after all. Halkara’s family was an exception.

“I asked Sandra, and she said it was better than the ground!”

Right, a plant would say that.

Laika came to stand beside us. “I admire your workout. I must not fall behind!” she said, joining in.

Wait, does she really need training to build muscle? Eh, I won’t stop her, though. Couldn’t hurt.

“I, the great Flatorte, am not doing something as stupid and simple as ‘working out.’ Oh, man... I totally forgot what number I was on...”

Oh, she was trying to keep count again... We shouldn't talk during a workout.

“One, two, three—in that case—seven, eight—what are you doing—eleven, twelve!” Laika skillfully conversed and counted while she worked.

“Can’t you tell? This is why you red dragons are so useless. Your hot spring town makes you obsessed with the perfect temperature.”

“I can’t tell—if you’re disparaging me—or complimenting me—seventeen, eighteen!”

Yeah, you could use that in an ad for a hot spring.

“Then let me tell you.”

There was a smug look on Flatorte’s face.

“My body yearns for battle!”

“Ohhh, right, right—wait, you wanted to fight just the other day!” I said, while Laika complained at about the same time.

“Did you not let everything out at the bullfighting festival?!”

Like master, like apprentice.

“Mistress, that bullfighting festival didn’t totally satisfy my burning need for battle. That’s why I started working my abs, because it might help. One, two, three, four!”

She didn’t know how far she was in her count anymore, so she started over from one...

Still, this was the first time I’d ever heard someone talk about helping their need for battle in a sentence.

I guess that happens when you live for a long time. I still had a lot to learn.

“So doing crunches is helping you?”

I didn’t really want to do any dinner prep in the kitchen across from her doing her sit-ups. It was kind of unnerving.

“Honestly? Not at all! One, two, three, four!” She started at one again...
“Mistress, are there any forests around here I can freeze?”

“No! No destroying the environment!”

“Okay... I’ll do all the crunches I can, so I don’t have to freeze anything...,”
Flatorte replied gloomily. Her crestfallen sit-ups were a bit strange to watch.

Hmm... What *could* she freeze? Not a whole lot of options...

That’s when I heard the flapping of large wings.

When I went outside, I found a large wyvern soaring overhead. A delivery? Or a visitor?

The wyvern slowly landed on the highlands.

“Oi, oi, it’s Muu! Sovereign of the Thursa Thursa Kingdom. Specializin’ in one-liners an’ knot tricks. Ow, ow, this knot’s really pressin’ on me throat—Hey! This ain’t a knot trick; it’s a noose! An’ there ya ’ave it—I’ll be ’ere all week!”

“What a morbid way to say hello!”

All she really had to say was *hi*.

Muu was alone for this visit (except for the wyvern, but it was more like her car).

“Boy, once we star’ed partnerin’ wiv the demons and borrowin’ the wyverns, I’ve been goin’ far an’ wide!”

“That’s great, but make sure you don’t let normal people see you, okay? It might cause some complications. Although...maybe a regular person wouldn’t be able to tell you’re the queen of an ancient civilization.”

She didn’t have any unique-looking horns on her head or anything.

“So what brings you here today? Rosalie should be floating somewhere in the house.”

The most likely reason she was here was to hang out with Rosalie.

“Not this time.” She made a big X with her arms.

Wow, that came across a little strong.

“I got a favor to ask of you. Figured you lot at the house in the highlan’s might be able to do somefin’.”

“A favor? Tell me what it is, then. We have to know that first.”

I had no idea what the ancient queen was going to ask of me.

“I want ya to cool down the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.”

“Cool it down?”

What did she mean by that? Was this some kind of metaphor? Did she want me to ruin her economy? She’s a ghost; what could that possibly mean?

“Well, I’ll tell ya the rest inside. It’ll take a while to explain.”

“Sure. Let’s go, then.”

But when I came to the door, I realized something was off and turned around.

Muu had only moved one step, if that. “Rgh... Just one step at a time... Just one step at a time an’ I’ll make it there ’ventually...”

“You still have no physical strength!”

Seeing this after eight hundred plus sit-ups gave me whiplash.

I just carried her into the house.

Muu’s request for us to cool off her kingdom basically went like this: “The Thursa Thursa Kingdom is currently sufferin’ from climate change.”

I wasn’t expecting to hear about that issue in this world...

“But your country isn’t creating any CO₂ emissi—Oh right, you don’t have the concept of CO₂.”

Carbon dioxide probably existed in this world, but the presence of magic made the science a lot less rigorous.

“Don’t know ’bout no CO₂ or CO₁ or CO₃, but our kingdom’s been ’round a long while. And fins’ve gotten a lot warmer in the meantime.”

I see... They did say that Earth was a bit cooler several hundred years ago... The world’s always gone through periods like that, even without the advances of science and technology.

“But you’re all already dead, so shouldn’t it not affect you?”

I wasn’t clear on what the downsides were here. Maybe for Muu, her physical body would decay faster, but I doubted she was here for such a personal problem.

“Climate change...is growin’ all sorts o’ plants we’ve never seen before...,” she said, her face pale.

“Wait... That’s it?”

That was a lot more trivial than I was expecting.

“‘That’s it’? Is that all you ’ave to say?! This is a bloody serious problem!”

She was angry with me, but I genuinely didn’t understand.

“I know that pollen from new plants can give us humans allergies and stuff, but it shouldn’t affect ghosts, right?”

“Pollen doesn’t affect me, either!” came a voice from my feet.

Rosalie’s head was poking out from the ground underneath my chair.

“Holy—! Where the hell did you come from?! You scared me! Took years off me life!”

Muu was just *waiting* for me to say something. Well, maybe not; I could tell the shock was real.

“Sheesh, don’t you get it? The new plants sprout between our graves! Could break ’em right up! Ha, graves in grave danger...now that’s a right bubble...”

I ignored that last part.

“Oh, plants can break stone with their roots.”

“Precisely.”

Muu pointed both her index fingers at me, with both her thumbs pointing straight up. Were those supposed to be finger guns? This sovereign was looking more and more like a desperate entertainer...

“Some real fast-spreadin’ buggers have gotten into the stone, an’ everyone’s families are in a pickle... At this rate, our ruins’ll be totally ruin’d in a hundred

an' fifty years..."

"Oh, a hundred and fifty years?"

That wasn't me, actually; Flatorte jumped in this time. I was honestly about to say the same thing, though.

"If it's that far off, then you're still fine. I'm sure you'll figure something out before then."

"Listen! This stuff sneaks up on ya! It'll still be damaged in a hun'ed years! We needa act before that happens! If we only start finking of solutions in a hun'ed an' fifty years, then time ain't on our side no more!"

That did make sense. If we didn't hurry and come up with a solution, then we'd have far more repairs to do.

"That's why I came all 'is way to ask for your 'elp."

She sure sounded arrogant for someone asking for help... But she was a queen.

Wait, so then what she came here to ask us was—

"Cool down all our ruins to wither up all the plants growin' there! Turn it into a wasteland tha'll keep all the bloody weeds away!"

Huh, that's the first time I've seen someone ask to turn their home into a wasteland...

But I still had some apprehensions, so I had to check.

"It's possible, I think, but we could erode or break the stone in the process of harming the plants, too."

If the water in the stone froze, that could cause its own kind of damage.

"Not to worry! We'll use a magic barrier to make sure none o' the elements get inside the stones. Lower the temps to get every single one o' those plants out! Please! Cheers!"

"Don't say 'cheers' before I've given the okay!"

But in truth, it wasn't such a bad proposal. I'd actually say that our interests lined up here.

“This is perfect for you, isn’t it, Flatorte?” I patted the dragon next to me on the shoulder. “Use your desire for battle to cool down their ruins. You could breathe all the ice you wanted!”

“I’d love to! I’ll cut loose! I can freeze everything to pieces!”

Flatorte’s excitement went from zero to a hundred in a second.

“To pieces? No, don’t do ‘at... Don’t break our relics... Y’know you’re jus’ freezin’ up the plants, right?”

Muu was surprisingly calm about this.

To be honest, I was kind of scared to send Flatorte off on her own. Extremely scared, actually.

“Okay, then Flatorte and I will go to the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.”

“Oh, you’re comin’ wiv us, too.”

The *us* was actually referring to the first person—she was talking about herself. It’s a Cockney thing. Technically, it was a completely different language, but the magic translation made it sound like that to me.

“And why don’t you come along, too, Rosalie?” I said to the ghost, whose head was popping out of the floor at my feet. Why was she hanging out down there?

“I can go, too? I’ll definitely come along!”

There weren’t a lot of places with a bunch of ghosts, so I bet Rosalie enjoyed her time there.

I think we were all caught up in the situation. All we needed to know next was when we were— “Right, so you’re coming wiv us now. I’ve got an inn ready for ya.”

“Wait, at least let me rearrange our schedule,” I said. This queen sure was impatient.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. Just go in, bam, get it done, bish bash bosh, finished. Leave it for la’er, an’ we’ll forget ‘bout it. Flatorte an’ Rosalie are unemployed, right? C’mon, the wyvern’s waitin’. Let’s go.”

So pushy. I had a lot of random drop-ins at the house in the highlands, but not many of them were this forceful about it...

But my schedule was open, and my life was relatively relaxed overall. I could stand to be away from the house for three or four days.

Getting it done quickly and coming home early wasn't such a bad thought, either. Just in case, though, I'd leave someone in charge for the time being.

"Laika, you're the boss while we're gone."

Frankly, Laika was the most reliable one here.

"Yes! I will take good care of it! I will protect the house in the highlands with my life!"

"Not if it comes to that! Your life is way more important!"

Now that I'd left the job in someone else's hands, I went around to my daughters to tell them I was going.

"We'll be good, so bring us back something fun~!"

"No need for you to worry about the house at all. Shalsha wants a souvenir, too."

"I'll just take dirt."

Ah, right, travel gifts... Unlike the demon lands, they didn't really sell things in the Thursa Thursa Kingdom. And I wasn't so sure about dirt. If there were any seeds in whatever I picked up, then wouldn't that lead to the spread of invasive species...?

"I'll do my best," I replied to them vaguely.

Rosalie and I hopped on dragon Flatorte's back and departed for the Thursa Thursa Kingdom.

It was hard to say precisely if Rosalie was actually riding on Flatorte's back, but Flatorte was sort of carrying her, at least.



"I'm starting to get used to the look of these ruins now," I said as we stood among the rows of pyramid-like structures.

“All right, jus’ go and make it cool here. Freeze ’em up!”

“Wait, we can’t just rush into this. If we don’t approach this carefully, then you’ll regret it for the rest of your death. We should check out the place first.”

Rosalie was right. And it was more convincing with a ghost saying it.

“I, the great Flatorte, cannot be bothered. I just wanna let it all out.”

Rosalie and I were right to come along...

“I know you want us to cool it down, but we should still get a sense of scope on this whole thing. Just hold tight for a second.”

Right then, a Thursa Thursa Kingdom minister came to us.

“I am glad to see you all again. Has anything changed with you? As ghosts, we are exactly the same.”

The one who’d given us the weird greeting was Nahna Nahna, who basically acted as chief maid and minister. She was still wearing that outfit that showed her midriff, but I guess the cold wasn’t a problem for ghosts.

“Hey there. What kind of effects is this climate change having on you?”

“Well, it’s quite terrible, really. I would like you to take a look at these community commoner graves—every three rooms comes with a toilet and bath.”

“Your commoner graves look a lot like apartment blocks...”

We walked a short way to find some more ancient stone buildings, although these weren’t pyramids.

They were plain, rectangular buildings that looked like massive apartment blocks.

“Oh yeah! We’ve never come this way before, Big Sis,” said Rosalie.

“You didn’t know about them, either?”

Flatorte could hardly keep herself still—she was hopping in place and punching the air. No grace at all.

“As you can see, it’s just a residential area. Who’d bring guests out ’ere?”

“Indeed. There are no sights to see. Just a crowd of ghosts living their deaths.”

This was just how it was for this kingdom, but it kind of sucked to have to stay a commoner even after you were dead...

“And this is where the damage is especially bad.” Nahna Nahna pointed to a crumbling ruin completely covered in green ivy.

“Whoa, this is way worse than I thought!”

All I could see was green at this point. It was difficult to tell if the actual structure was made of stone.

“At first, the ghosts not-living here enjoyed the elegance it added to the building and said it would look very nice in illustrations, but the vines have grown so heavy that we can no longer ignore it.”

“It’s only a matter of time before it starts getting inside, right?”

“Yes. And to make matters worse, the gaps between stones are larger in commoner community buildings than they are in residences for the upper class, so damage spreads quite easily.”

Your status after death was so solidified—this was downright dystopian.

“Wow, the plants grow impressively fast...”

“Right? Knew you’d agree, Rosalie. They do way more damage than any ol’ ghost. At the rate they’re goin’, they’ll get into all the rocks an’ destroy all our buildin’s. We gotta get rid of ‘em.”

I finally grasped just how alarming of a situation the Thursa Thursa Kingdom was in.

It was already in a warm region, but plants coming from even warmer regions became big threats.

“Yes. I, the great Flatorte, will take a deep breath, and—”

“Wait, wait! We still have to prepare!” I had to periodically hold Flatorte back to keep things safe.

“Miss Nahna Nahna, Flatorte’s breath is like a blizzard, so I believe it would be better if it didn’t directly touch the buildings. Do you have magic that will

prevent that?”

A snowstorm would damage the construction—what if Flatorte ended up doing the same?

“Yes. We will cover all the buildings with a veil that will repel physical attacks, so we would appreciate it if you breathed from the sky.”

“On it!”

Flatorte suddenly transformed into a dragon. Fortunately, we were in a rather open space, but it was still shocking to see her suddenly turn massive right in front of my eyes.

“Mistress, I’ll be waiting up top, so let me know when you get the okay!”

I couldn’t get another word in edgewise, because she was already up high in the sky. She *really* wanted to let ‘er rip.

“...Okay then, Miss Nahna Nahna, go ahead and take care of the magical barrier.”

“Certainly. I already have the technicians in place.”

A group of ghosts assembled around us, all of them with a large number of stone tablets floating in front of them. The tablets would be acting as remote controls, I assumed, and they were floating either by ghost powers or via magic.

But I recognized these people—specifically, their shiny bald heads.

They were the Hair Growth magic people!

“It’s nice to see you again, Miss Azusa. I am Dan Dan, supervisor for today’s defensive magic technology. No snow will even touch the top of the buildings. They will remain pristine and clear.”

Yeah, like your head!

I wanted to say it aloud, but that would be rude.

“We will form a barrier over all of the buildings here to protect them from physical attacks. These pristine barriers will ward off all kinds of physical attacks.”

“You just want to say *pristine*! Sounds like that’s a word you’re extra fond of.”

After the second time, I couldn't help myself.

"Right, Dan Dan, get it done. Wither 'em proper. These plants'll never show their faces round 'ere again!"

"Understood. We will create a world of death where no grass or leaf will ever grow."

That sure was an extreme way of putting it, especially since everyone was dead already...

"Shouldn't you make sure not to kill the plants that were growing here to begin with...? You'll be destroying the environment in a different way..."

"We should be all right—the plants from hotter climates should disappear first. Our native plants will remain."

I could see the logic. The native plants were growing somewhere in the area here, and even if they shriveled up a bit, they'd probably recover quickly.

Work proceeded swiftly after that. Five minutes later, a dome of light that was most likely the barrier appeared in the sky.

"Pristine dome, successfully deployed! So long as we remain inside, anything from spears to the sun cannot harm us!"

If the sun was close enough to make contact with the barrier, then the world would end. So I hoped that didn't happen.

"Great. Then I'll give Flatorte the signal."

I flew straight up until I could see Flatorte myself.

The light dome was partially see-through, so she could almost certainly tell where it was.

"We're good!" I waved my hand.

I could tell dragon Flatorte was looking right at me.

"Here I go! Five, four, one!"

"Don't jump the countdown!"

Ah, I bet she couldn't hear what I was saying.

She was already blasting the dome with the biggest cold breath she'd ever breathed.

Fwooooooooooo!

The concentrated jet of frigid air gave me a chill just listening to it as it swirled around the outside of the dome.

When I returned to the ground, I could tell that the temperature had gone down.

"Brr! It's freezing... Miss Nahna Nahna, do you have any blankets...?"

"We have nothing for the living. If you dig a hole for yourself, you might find the dirt warm."

"I don't want to dig my own grave for warmth, thank you."

Oh well. I just had to put up with it. I wrapped my arms around myself and did all I could to keep my body heat from escaping.

"Whooooaaa! Nice one, Flatorte! That's some real power!"

Rosalie was excited, too—she liked the dramatics.

From my vantage point on the ground, I could see lumps of ice colliding with the dome with high-pitched *dinks*. I guess those came out of Flatorte's mouth, too.

Honestly, the whole sight was truly magnificent. A normal living person might be a little unsettled by this if they saw it, though. *It won't be so pretty once the magic effect wears off.*

"Flatorte must be satisfied after all that. I'm always impressed by how *big* everything is with dragons..."

I'd never breathed any cold myself, but I was convinced such a massive release would be very helpful with her stress. I bet it'd been a long time since Flatorte last got to use her breath with all her might, too.

"If Flatorte and Sis Laika fought with all their strength, who do you think'd win?" Rosalie asked me with genuine interest.

"Good question... Probably shouldn't find out. Their battleground would be a

wasteland afterward.”

“Pretend they wouldn’t, then! What do you think?”

Ahhh, yeah, we were just speaking in hypotheticals.

“I really don’t know. But I have a feeling it’d be a hard fight for Laika. She doesn’t handle the cold well.”

Just a thought, but had Flatorte been holding back, at least a little, whenever she fought Laika and the red dragons? This frigid cold was so shocking that I was almost convinced.

...Nah, Flatorte would never hold back, would she?

And if she was being tied down by rules, then she might lose surprisingly quickly...



“Dang...it’s cold...” I huddled into myself. I might get sick after this.

“Oi, can’t handle the cold? Ain’tcha embarrassed, miss super-witch?”

“How tough it must be to be alive. I sympathize. I recommend dying sooner rather than later.”

The ghosts pitied me. I mean, I was the only living human inside this dome. Being in the minority made me feel small...

Flatorte’s cold breath was still hammering the dome, and the temperature inside was still dropping.

“We must be around freezing temps right now. I really want a coat.”

“You’re doing great, Big Sis. Life sure is full of hardships, huh?”

I can’t believe the ghosts are comforting me now!

“I’m about as hardy as humans come, so you don’t really need to worry about me. If you brought along a regular person, this could really affect their health.”

A pond near us was now covered in a thick sheet of ice.

I suddenly had a terrible feeling.

“Hey, if someone were outside this dome, wouldn’t they freeze to death...?”

I looked to the side and saw icy snow piling up.

Then came a loud rumble and a crash as some snow slid off the slanted part of the dome and fell to the ground below.

Because of that, only the areas right outside were under heavy snow cover. A good few meters of it at least.

“We’ve got our own little avalanche, too. The world outside looks like hell; I really hope no one’s out there...”

“Miss Azusa, no human ever ventures into such an elusive land as ours. You are making yourself anxious for no reason.”

“Yeah. What Nahna Nahna said. No human can even get here. If somehow they managed to get a gander at us, they’d run home in fear anyway!”

“I hope so... Ooh... Ah-choo!”

I'd never experienced it before, but my instincts were saying we'd dipped into the negatives. Maybe more, even. Less than negative twenty?

As I endured the cold, I heard Muu shout.

"Oi, it's workin'!"

The leaves on the ivy around the ruins were turning brown. Finally, some withering.

"Almost there, Flatorte! Show us all you got! Keep it goin'!"

Muu was waving her arms around in excitement. Now was the one time that I was really jealous of her for not having a sense of cold.

All kinds of plants were starting to wither away. (And so was I.) Little by little, the green was fading.

"Yesss! Get 'em! Get 'em good!"

"Hey, uh, maybe take it back a notch...? This is uncouth, even for you. And you don't have to wave your arms all the time..."

She was looking less like a ruler and more like a rioter.

"Oh, an' my body's not moving like I want it to. Can't put me arm down."

"Your lack of exercise is worse than I thought!"

All her movable parts were like an awkward-looking doll.

"Never had a problem wiv me arms before, though... Well, at least I can still see what she's up to."

All of the spirits in that building block had come outside now to watch Flatorte and the ivy. Flatorte was like a hero as she defeated the invasive greenery.

This was the best possible outcome for her, considering she was helping others while relieving her own stress.

"This should get rid of the ivy. What a happy ending we have now." Nahna Nahna made small enough claps that they didn't make a sound. Or maybe that was just because she was a ghost.

All the ivy clinging to the buildings crumbled to the ground like a melting ice statue.

It was finally cold enough that the plants totally froze over, and we could see the stone walls of the buildings. Our plan was a success.

“Well, I’m super cold, but...I’m glad the plan was a success. That went off without a hitch.”

I really should’ve kept my mouth shut. I jinxed us.

“The hell, I really can’t move... It’s ’bout time I get my arms down. Hah!” Muu mustered her strength, put force into her arms, and— *Pop!*

Muu’s right arm fell off.

Thunk...

That was a hard sound when it hit the ground. Two rock-solid objects making contact.

“Gaaah! What on earth?! Why’s my arm fallen off?!” Muu exclaimed in shock. But she wasn’t freaking out, at least not yet.

Everything happened so fast after that.

Muu’s body parts plopped off one by one, just like the ivy falling off the building.

“Aaaaaaaagh! Holy crap! This is like a horror scene now!” I covered my eyes.

“What the *hell* is going on?! Why’m I fallin’ apart in the cold?!”

“Ah yes, I see now,” Nahna Nahna said calmly. “Miss Azusa, this is not an emergency for Her Majesty. There is no need to worry.”

Uh, how exactly is this not an emergency?

“Well, you know Her Majesty has a physical body, unlike the rest of us ghosts.”

“Yeah. She’s your queen, so she gets special treatment or something.”

“There is a certain degree of moisture within her body. Otherwise, she would be too desiccated to move.”

“I get that much.”

“Now that that moisture has frozen, it has broken her body. It seems we are no longer within an acceptable temperature range for regular creatures to live. You would have died by this point were you not a great and powerful witch. I am glad you are one.”

“One wrong step and I could’ve died... You sound way too calm for this.”

Good thing I didn’t bring my daughters along, geez.

“I get what’s going on, but are you sure it’s okay to leave Muu like that?!”

I knew it was important for the minister to remain calm, but she was barely reacting at all.

“No matter how physically cold she may get, it will not harm her spirit at all, so this problem is trivial. We will simply need to piece her back together soon.”

“Yeah. I broke, an’ that’s that. We’ll deal wiv it later.”

Muu herself was already calm. She had no nerves at all—both figuratively and literally now.

But I could barely even look at her.

“This is gruesome! I need someone to blur this all out for me before I can look at you!”

This was just straight-up gore!

And not only that, but a new kind of gore. It was nasty, like a human body had been completely dried out and then thoroughly crumbled to bits. Her face didn’t even look like a face anymore... I was taking actual psychic damage.

“Whoa, you’re a mess! Yuck,” said Rosalie.

“Right? You can literally see my ribs!”

As I listened to them, I started to feel like I was losing it out here.

“Hey, how are you talking now, Muu?”

“It’s me spirit talkin’. Me body has nuffin’ to do wiv it. If I was makin’ physical sounds, then ya wouldn’t be able to understand me ancient parlance, an’ I

wouldn't be able to understand what you're sayin'."

I see. Her body really was just a vessel for her divine spirit—or whatever.

"Oi, I'm used to this now, so I can move."

Muu, whose body was shattered into hundreds of parts, stood up. Well, floated up, since she wasn't using the muscles in her arms and legs.

All her parts were generally in the right place—but off just by one. Her face, especially, was a pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey mess. Her nose was at her throat, and her ear was at the back of her head.

Out of context, this horrifying picture would stay with you until you died...

"Now this is new. I'm gonna go take a little walk."

"How can you be so calm?!" *Don't act like this isn't a big deal! A walk is way too normal for this!*

"It's fine, Big Sis. Muu's in great shape, so she'll be fine."

"You sure about that? I feel like she's beyond reviving with any kind of restorative magic..."

Living people's perspectives were totally worthless here.

Muu did indeed walk off after that. Er, maybe *walk* isn't the right word, either? Her leg muscles were completely useless at this point anyway. Language that uses humans as a default creates all sorts of inconsistencies.

About the same time as she left, Flatorte's cold breath stopped. That sound that made you colder just hearing it was finally gone.

"Hey, how was that? I, the great Flatorte, am satisfied! I haven't been able to cut loose completely in forever!" I could hear Flatorte's voice echoing from the top of the dome.

"Very good! It was a great success. All the invasive plants have perished. Please take a look. As you can see, the commoner buildings look quite different now," Nahna Nahna replied.

The rectangular buildings were the color of rough concrete.

"Now you may stop the magic. Dan Dan?"

“Of course. I am glad to see not a single hair was harmed on anyone. And certainly not me!”

Please, no stupid jokes, thank you. I was starting to think bald jokes were the only reason he was bald at all.

When the ancient magical device stopped, the dome of light vanished, and warm air gradually started to fill the space.

“Oh right... I totally forgot when I saw that disaster with Muu, but it really was cold in here.”

How far into the negatives had it gone? Either way, it was probably too dangerously cold to hold a conversation in regular clothes. Any normal person would have been in peril the second the chill entered their body.

“Well, Flatorte got some stress relief in, and we saved the Thursa Thursa Kingdom, so I’d consider this a win-win, huh?”

Just as I finished speaking—

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaugh!”

—I heard a scream from beyond the ruins, right where the buildings and the forest met, basically.

“What? What happened now?”

I didn’t recognize the voice; it sounded like it belonged to a man.

“I doubt it is of any importance. Please pay it no mind.” Nahna Nahna breezily brushed it off.

“I honestly don’t think that’s possible, Miss Nahna Nahna.”

“That was not the voice of one of ours. If one or two humans were to enter our territory, we would be able to drive them away.”

Honestly, it was hard to believe what she said, but—

“If you say so, Minister, then I’ll trust you.”

Later, the fragmented Muu came back.

“Thought I’d put meself back togeva on me own, but I failed~”

She looked way worse than when she left—her head was practically buried in her chest.

“You messed up, big-time! You’re a total monster now!”

“Well, people need a mirror to see themselves. Y’know how ya can’t scratch an itchy back? Couldn’t totally fix meself.”

“Please don’t chat with me when your body is scrambled.”

I’m sure my panic made me seem to be the odd one out, but don’t get the wrong idea—I was the only one who *wasn’t* being weird.

“An’ I ran across some explorer guy, too.”

“That’s who was screaming!”

“He passed right out, so I sent ’im outside the forest wiva spell. An’ I made sure to use magic to mask our ruins. Doubt he’ll be back.”

“Ah, perhaps we were temporarily visible to humans due to the defensive dome magic,” Nahna Nahna offered, and it sounded reasonable to me.

“Humans shouldn’t be able to see our ruins, but we stopped the illusion magic we usually ’ave. Musta been his lucky day, eh?”

“Your Majesty, are you sure that should be considered good luck? Those who live in blissful ignorance of us are the fortunate ones, I would say.”

“You might be right~ Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

I knew why, but these ghosts were extra unique. Other ghosts would probably consider them an affront to ghostkind.

Either way, our job came to a peaceful end, so all was well.

Oh right. There was one thing I wanted to do before going home.

“Hey, do you have anything I could take home for my girls? They were asking for stuff.”

I wasn’t really expecting much, though.

“Oh, hmm...” Muu thought for a little while, and she finally looked down at the ground. “You can take home as much dirt as you want. I bet all the li’l

creatures in there are dead. Might still be some seed, but I doubt they'd grow way up in the chilly 'ighlands."

I had no idea I'd actually end up bringing some dirt home...

"O-okay, then I'll take some of that for Sandra... Do you have anything for Falfa and Shalsha?"

Maybe I'd stop off in some village on the way home to find something.

"If you'd like, Miss Azusa, feel free to take some of that with you." Nahna Nahna pointed to the outside of the ruins—and a wall of ice.

So much snow and ice had fallen outside the dome that the entirety of the ruins now looked like a walled city.

"They would be able to play in the snow if you brought some back," she explained.

"Miss Nahna Nahna—"

"What, were you going to complain that it's not much different from dirt?"

"What a refined suggestion. I'll take you up on that idea."

It might be fun to take some snow home. It didn't get that hot in the highlands, but it didn't get snow like some other colder places did. I was sure Falfa and Shalsha would be happy with this.

"Hmm, these compliments are making me uncomfortable..." Nahna Nahna clearly did not enjoy receiving such direct approval. I'd never seen this side of her before. "My duodenum itches."

"That's very...specific."

"It is no more than a sensation. All of my organs have long since ceased functioning."

I knew that, but as a living person, I thought it was a strange thing to imagine.

I hung a large box of snow (and dirt for Sandra) around dragon Flatorte's neck. I doubted the cold from the snow would bother her much, so it was the perfect arrangement.

It wasn't so bad to help out the ghosts every once in a while!



FLATORTE GOT HER ACT TOGETHER



Sandra used her dirt from the Thursa Thursa Kingdom right away, and when Falfa and Shalsha got their snow, they immediately used it to build something called a snowdwarf.

“Dwarves aren’t supposed to be this round, are they?” I asked. It was basically just a snowman.

“Mommy, you’re supposed to make them from big snowballs.”

“This is an ancient folk tradition of those who live in the north. They are said to represent guardians who keep evil spirits away.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m perfectly happy so long as you’re enjoying yourselves.”

Meanwhile, Laika used the snow and ice to make a crystalline bird. “Hmm, I suppose that should do for now.”

“This is like a whole winter festival!”

She really went overboard for everything she did! I didn’t know Laika had artistic sensibilities, too...

And Rosalie and Halkara were having a “snowball fight.” At least, that’s what Rosalie was calling it.

“You are such a coward, Miss Rosalie! You know it’s practically impossible for me to win this! You can score points against me, but not vice versa! Oh, you can’t make and throw five snowballs at once! This is so unfair! Even if I could score against you, this would still not be fair!”

“But, Big Sis Halkara, I’ve always dreamed of having a snowball fight! Please!”

“I know you’re asking nicely, but I cannot see how this is—Bwaaaah!” Halkara took all the snowballs at once.

Sorry. It's just for a little while, Halkara...

"Miss Rosalie, please do this with Miss Flatorte instead. She can withstand the cold better...", said Halkara.

Ah, good point. Flatorte would probably match Rosalie evenly in that case.

"But Flatorte's cleaning right now," Rosalie said, tilting her head. "She's so different, like something's possessed her... It's super weird..."

Rosalie had also caught on to Flatorte's...abnormality. But note that she only said it was *like* she was possessed; if she was really possessed, Rosalie would know.

The point is—something was wrong with Flatorte.

Maybe Flatorte had been more than satisfied with her work in the kingdom of the dead, because when we came back to the house in the highlands, there was a bit of a problem.

She was polite now.



For example, on the day it was Flatorte's turn to clean—

"She's really going at it..."

She was cleaning so thoroughly that I almost commented that even Laika wouldn't go this far.

Flatorte moved the shelves and tables when she was mopping. That's more than what you do for moving and spring cleaning, right?

"One, two. One, two. One, two. I suppose that's it for the dining room, then. Mistress, shall I clean your room, too?" Flatorte asked me with a bright smile. She wasn't wearing a suit, but I was getting dapper-butler vibes from her. The clothes she wore seemed more crisp than usual, too, so fresh and sprightly.

"Uh, no, it's okay... I can do that on my own..."

The new Flatorte was even throwing things away she would never have considered trash before, so I was a little worried about the herbs I was drying.

"Please do not hesitate to tell me if you need anything. I am here to serve

you, after all, Mistress.”

She was even talking like a butler!

“Uh, sure... I’ll let you know if I come up with anything...”

And on the day it was her turn to make food, she was simmering stew in a pot for five hours.

“Hey... Why not stick to something simple...? You’re getting ready for dinner before we’ve even finished lunch, aren’t you...?”

“Oh, no, it’s all right. I wouldn’t be able to do this every day, but it’s only for my cooking days,” she replied with a cheerful smile.

“Also, you’re a blue dragon—doesn’t it tire you out being so close to the fire for a long time?”

“Oh, this is quite tolerable. Please, relax as long as you need, Mistress.”

Grin!

Her smile was so bright it almost made its own sound effect.

I, on the other hand, was so not used to whatever this was. My smile was anxious and tense.

Sometimes, when you’re confronted with something beyond your comprehension, all you can do is smile. Some of these changes I just couldn’t bring myself to enjoy, even if they were technically good ones...

“This is bizarre... Flatorte’s so well behaved now... Everything she does is so... brisk.”

Watching Flatorte cook gave me the shivers, so I went outside. That’s where I found Laika, taking down the laundry.

Flatorte had clearly undergone a change in her personality after all that icy breath.

Laika was nonplussed by Flatorte’s sudden change, too.

“Hmm... She is not her usual self. I cannot see a single sign of her typical laziness and sloppiness at all.”

“It’s weird for you, too, huh?”

“Yes. To be blunt, it frightens me.”

I thought that was a kind of mean thing to say, but it scared me a bit, too.

“How she opens and closes doors, for example, is so gentle and quiet. At first, I could not tell who it was that was wandering around. It left me so uneasy...”

“Oh yeah, you can usually tell who’s up and about by how they use the doors...”

As Laika and I chatted, Flatorte herself came outside. The way she walked, even outside, was dainty and tranquil. She wouldn’t be kicking up any dust like that.

“Oh, Laika. Should I take Halkara to and from work today for you?”

“There is no need for you to be so considerate! Are you really Flatorte?! You are like someone else entirely! Are you sure you’ve not been possessed by an evil spirit?”

Laika’s evil spirit hypothesis was reasonable, but Rosalie did say that there was nothing possessing her...

“Ah-ha-ha. I, the great Flatorte, am not so weak as to be possessed. I am how I always am. Today I am making a stew so delicious it will shock you, Laika, so I hope you’re ready.”

“No, every boorish part of you has vanished... You would never have cooked such an intensive dish before. You always stuck to simple dishes—pan-fry the meat, and you’re done!”

Meat with a sprinkling of salt was good for what it was, and Flatorte was far from a bad cook, but all her dishes had as few steps as possible.

“Ah. It must be because I got everything out of my system with the ghosts. Maybe that’s why my heart feels so still.”

I guess that meant she’d relieved all her stress.

I leaned over to Laika and whispered, “Hey, maybe when Flatorte goes on a rampage that actually leaves her satisfied, she turns into, like, a really good

kid?”

Laika nodded emphatically. “That is very possible... After all those years among the sloppy and rowdy blue dragons, I didn’t believe she was capable of being so calm. This might be her real self...”

“But do you want her to stay this way?” I asked. The ultimate question.

Laika immediately shook her head. “This side of her bewilders me. I must decline.”

“Yeah. This is way too big of a difference.”

“However, she hasn’t been brainwashed, so we cannot refuse her if she has decided to live an earnest and dependable lifestyle. We have no choice but to leave it to her.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

We couldn’t totally deny the possibility that she’d just reexamined her way of life. We had no right to tell her not to live this way because she used to be a mess.

“But...the old Flatorte gave me more peace of mind...” Laika sadly watched on as Flatorte returned to the kitchen.

The stew that night had chunks of meat that melted in the mouth the second they touched your tongue. It was a hit with the whole family.



—And that was how Flatorte came to act so gracious.

“Hey, Rosalie, do you think people’s personalities change when they accomplish major goals?” I asked her as she hovered next to me. I’d never set really big goals for myself before, so I wasn’t sure.

“I’m a ghost, so I don’t know much about people.”

Oh, I asked the wrong person.

“But I doubt it’d have this much of an impact. I can guarantee that,” Rosalie said with a smile. “My eighth sense says so.”

“Humans only have up to six!”

But what Rosalie said was right.

Flatorte's transformation lasted for a week.

"Ahhh, I forgot to take a bath. Well, I didn't sweat at all, so I'll take one tomorrow."

"Didn't you say the same thing yesterday, Flatorte? Go bathe."

"But no one's told me I stink yet, Mistress."

"If people can smell you, it's already too late."

"Fine. If I have to take a bath, then I want to work up a sweat. I'll do a thousand push-ups."

"You don't need to do that!"

But Flatorte's reaction oddly soothed me. Maybe her lust for battle had returned her to her old self.

"Man, I wish I could freeze over a whole lake," Flatorte said as she did her thousand push-ups.

And so, Flatorte returned to the delinquent dragon we knew.

During dinner, she tried to eat her soup with her hands, so I told her to either use a spoon or dunk some bread into it.

"Yeah, but we have less to clean if I don't use a spoon."

What is she, a college bachelor...?

She blew a small stream of cold breath into her soup bowl, and a little of it drifted my way.

"Down the hatch!"

She put the bowl to her lips and gulped the soup down. Afterward, she loaded up a whole platter filled with meat for herself and wolfed that down, too. She was like a garbage disposal...

"Yes, eating like this makes everything taste way better!"

"You are so unbelievably crude. You are setting a terrible example for Falfa and Shalsha," Laika warned her. She could never let bad manners slide without

comment. For my part, I thought Flatorte was worse than ever now.

“We won’t eat like that,” Falfa replied.

“A meal must begin and end with proper etiquette,” Shalsha added.

My daughters’ objections only made things more complicated.

“Laika,” said Flatorte, “what’s important isn’t how you eat; it’s how good it *tastes*. People like you get so wrapped up in your manners and stuffy etiquette that you lose sight of the goal. Do manners ever make food taste better?”

“This is not a conversation about manners. There is a spoon beside your bowl. Use it.”

“Honestly, putting things into separate bowls is just a cultural difference. Blue dragons’ll eat directly from the pot instead.”

“How awful... My head has started to hurt...” Laika started rubbing her temples. Blue-dragon culture was even more different than she thought.

“Should I cool your head down with a little cold breath?”

“No, thank you. That will only make it worse.” Laika flatly refused, but I could tell that part of her was relieved.

Bickering dragons was a much more familiar sight at the dinner table in our house.

Then, there came a steady knock at the door—but it opened before I could get over to it.

There stood Beelzebub.

“Did you lot go to the Thursa Thursa Kingdom?”

Uh-oh, she looked tired and annoyed. Did something bad happen?

“We did. What about it? Are we not allowed to make drastic environmental changes?”

Now that I thought about it, we might’ve killed some animals and bugs around the ruins along with the plants... But it was just in the area around those ruins, so the problem was probably isolated.

“This book has been published with great haste in the human lands. Fortunately, no one believes such tall tales; however...” Beelzebub placed a book on the table.

The flimsy cover and simple bindings indicated that it had been published on extremely short notice.

The title read *Ruins of the Ancient Rulers*.

“Oh, did someone find out about the Thursa Thursa Kingdom?”

“You would be correct. You should start reading from here.”

Beelzebub pointed out a passage, and I started reading.

—As I proceeded, there came a change I could not attribute to either natural phenomena or magic.

The temperature in the deep forest steadily fell, and then in the blink of an eye, a frigid wind was whipping around me.

This land is in the warm southern part of the kingdom, and though many warn of terrible plagues in the area, not even winter invites such a chill. But this cold seeped into my bones, into my very soul, and it only grew stronger as I made my way deeper into the wood.

I felt as though an unfathomable great and powerful being was blocking my way. Even the effects of a mage’s wintry spell would not linger for ten, twenty minutes afterward.

Then was it the work of a spirit? But spirits of ice and snow must live in the severest of mountaintops; I would never expect to find them in a land where not a single snowflake falls on even the coldest day of the year.

As my consciousness grew dim, I used the heat from one of my torches, which I had brought for treks in the night, to keep myself awake as I continued forth. Strangely, my curiosity was greater than the fear that I might pass a point of no return.

Then, as I parted grasses tall and thick as trees, I was eventually met with an even more unbelievable sight.

Standing at the edge of the forest was a towering wall of ice!

Oh, crap!

That was the day we were there!

I should keep reading. *Sure hope he didn't find us out...*

—I tried to scream, but the sound caught in my throat. Whatever was here could defy the laws of weather. I was uncertain who was attempting such a feat, but I could not deny the ice before my eyes.

The mountain was essentially vertical; I could not hope to climb it with my utmost efforts, so I decided to round the perimeter.

The wall seemed to continue on forever, but when one section collapsed in an avalanche, I was allowed a glimpse of what lay within it.

There I found no ice nor any snow but something I can describe only as a white, glimmering wall of light!

That was the ancient magic!

I read on.

—That wall of light was doubtlessly man-made. My torch was only enough to keep the insects away and the heat nearby, but I held it up to the light. Nothing happened. I struck it, but it made no sound, nor did it injure my hand. It made no reaction at all. Perhaps it was warning me that the only thing beyond here was a void of nothingness.

In my mind, I heard a voice whispering to me—a command to turn back now. I had been confronted with an unknown civilization. If I learned of what lay beyond here, then I would surely go mad.

But my rational judgment lost the battle to my curiosity.

This barrier was from a human civilization that existed long before the birth of any human still alive today. I knew this to be true, and my desire to learn more of this mystery kept me there. And I no longer had the physical strength to pull myself away.

Blood-freezing air descended upon the area around the wall, almost as though it was trying to snuff out every flame of life in this land.

A single step forward brought with it the exhaustion of a thousand-pace journey, and how I longed to stop. But even a child would know that if I were to halt, then I would surely perish then and there. I had no other choice but to walk along the mountain of ice and the veil of light beyond it.

A moment later, I wondered at the source of this boreal tempest. There must be something above me, in the sky.

I nervously lifted my head.

Hovering far above me was a noble, terrifying, mammoth dragon-like creature with wings spread out wide.

Wait, she *is* a dragon! She's not some weird, unknowable monster!

—Near the leviathan's maw was a gaping void, though I cannot be sure it was truly a mouth, and from it poured an endless stream of frigid air. Nothing about it was like any creature I knew.

It had exhaled so much snow and ice for such an unusually long time that I began to worry that it was no natural being at all, but a device whose only purpose was exuding this cold forever at a constant rate. But I could see the scales armoring its body, much like any creature of our world.

It did not look as though it was flying but as if it had been placed deliberately in the sky. It was infinitely more primal, more divine than any dragon.

No, no, hold on—she *is* a dragon! She's just a blue dragon, not a horror you shouldn't look at or whatever!

—Then, I knew—I could feel the truth in my very bones.

What if it was this unnamed creature that had created many of the icy mounds of unknowable age that can be found elsewhere in our world?

Had this creature reduced those forests lush with green into pure-white masses, just like this one?

Was this scaly, winged creature pushing our world to the brink of death for some grudge unknowable to humankind?

The moment I saw the sight, my strength left me, and I sank to my knees. I

did not know if this was because I had exposed my face to the cold for too long, or because I had seen something that should not exist in this world.

This guy was totally taking Flatorte for some ancient cosmic horror...

His narration made it sound like he was freezing to death, but if he published this book, that meant he made it back safe and sound. Time to keep reading.

—It was then, however, that I heard a strange voice coming from above me.

“Eyha w’wasda, ayethagre tflatortem sa tisfyy’d, ayehav n’t bynna bltuk utlu scomply tli’n f’rev’r.”

These sounds belonged to no ancient language that I knew of, but it was not the cry of a beast.

Suddenly, the cold air came to a halt, and soon after, the veil of light vanished as well.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! That mysterious language was actually Flatorte saying, “Hey, how was that? I, the great Flatorte, am satisfied! I haven’t been able to cut loose completely in forever!”

—Another, thinner mound of ice crumbled to the ground, no longer supported by the luminous veil, and I could now see the world beyond.

Again, I doubted my own eyes. There were several buildings of the queerest modality, unlike that of any world or era known to man.

Nearby were rows of box-shaped buildings that rose high into the heavens. They seemed to be made of stone, but the walls were so smooth that I could not imagine what technology they used to quarry it.

I guess the author was talking about the ghost residential area.

To be honest, those buildings were in rough shape. So this guy was either too excited, or his memory was fuzzy... But he was right about the style being completely unknown to most people.

—There were several openings that I surmised were entrances, but they were in both high and low places, and too small to accommodate humans by my reckoning.

It was then that my mind's eye showed me an exceptionally eerie sight.

These buildings were much too uncomfortable for normal bipedal creatures to live in—were they perhaps relics left by long, thin creatures? Did they swim through the air as fish do through the ocean, and these narrow holes were passageways for them?

In my absentminded stupor I dropped my torch. I know not when the flame had been extinguished.

I shambled forward among the buildings, these structures totally unfit for human use, like the mindless living dead.

Well, sure, ghost houses didn't need entrances fit for humans...

People who didn't know anything would probably imagine an ancient civilization created by strange beings. Well, they *were* ancient ruins, so this would be a heck of a discovery no matter what...

I turned to the next page.

—Far beyond the box buildings, I found rows of buildings of an entirely different style.

These had been fashioned in a triangular shape on all sides, again constructed according to a theory unlike any I knew.

The air was too cold for this to be a forest in a warm climate; all of my exposed skin was going numb from the cold; I could hardly feel anything at all anymore. It was difficult to imagine this place being habitable for humans—indeed, I sensed not a hint of conscious life. It was almost like a kingdom of the dead, where all had long ago met their end.

Hey, he got that part right!

It *was* a kingdom of the dead, which meant we could cool it down beyond livable human conditions.

—Various pleas for divine salvation came to mind, but no heavenly power would heed me now.

I stumbled forward, ever forward, though I know not what drove me.

Then, I heard a voice.

“Frutsk, frutsk, putste horar yani.”

This was not any language I knew, nor was it the language of the scaly creature in the sky.

And the sound itself was eerie, as if produced not by the throat but by an entirely different organ. The moment I heard that soul-rending sound, every hair on my body stood on end.

It was almost as if a tentacle had slithered up some nether orifice and into the brain, shaking around to create a dissonant cacophony with the teeth.

“This doesn’t sound like any of our voices—so by process of elimination that must be what he thought of Muu’s voice. Is that what she sounds like?!”

With her broken body, whatever Muu said wouldn’t have been translated into modern speech. This person had heard her speech as pure sounds. Talk about a psychological shock...

—My instincts screamed at me to run, but the muscles in my body had long given up trying to move.

I sensed that a great, unspeakable thing, one I could scarcely call a life-form, was drawing closer to me.

She wasn’t a *life*-form—she was dead! Ding-ding, correct again.

—All of a sudden, it appeared before me.

Oh, the horror that had come to me! What was this collection of a thousand broken pieces assembled into a parody of humanity?

No creature could move in this way; no creature could survive such a construction. And yet it approached. Whatever it was could not be easily categorized as demon or monster. It was not even alive.

Every portion of its body was similar to that of a human, yet some parts looked like fabric, and some parts were nothing at all.

Was this the divinity worshipped in this ancient civilization? And a mere man such as I had now encountered it face-to-face. That was the last thought

to cross my mind.

This horrifying, repugnant, unholy being defied any description, and all of my muscles and nerves seized and convulsed. With an ear-rending scream, I finally fell unconscious.

“Hey, that’s the scream we heard!”

The poor guy saw the gruesome, uncensored Muu and fainted from shock!

“I knew you had something to do with this... Please do not go out of your way to cause trouble...” Beelzebub looked positively exhausted as she exhaled.

“Wait, hold on; Muu asked us to be there, though! This isn’t our fault!”

I decided to keep reading.

—The next I knew, I lay among the trees in the forest.

The skin-splitting cold was now gone, and I found myself more worried about dehydration as I lay in a puddle of my own sweat with the sun’s rays filtering down on me through the trees.

Yet, my whole body was swollen as though it were midwinter. I knew I could never acknowledge the reality of any of it—the mountain of ice deep within the forest, the scaly creature in the sky, the veil of light, the buildings beyond of no recorded culture, the profane and ineffable entity that could not have borne the breath of life.

I staggered through the trees, and just as I was about to lose my entire sense of direction, I came across a small village at the entrance to the forest. There, I was told, I lay motionless in bed for days, absent as though my soul had left me.

But now the whirlwind in my heart has quelled, and so I write this pamphlet—it scarcely can be called a book—so that I may retain my own peace of mind.

Part of me tells me that I should not record any of this.

Perhaps my life would be much happier if I tell no one of the ancient civilization, one that is much older than any we know, or the nameless abomination they must have worshipped.

But I must write down what I saw for the sake of my own sanity. It is all that keeps my mind steady.

Oh, darkness has suddenly fallen, but it is not yet night.

Something is on my window.

What is it?

It's on my window! My window!

—My storm shutters had fallen closed.

“Your storm shutters were closed?!”

Well, if some crazy thing had actually climbed onto his window and gotten him, he wouldn't have been able to illustrate that in his note anyway... He wouldn't have been able to publish this thing, either.

“I also made sure to give a heads-up to the Thursa Thursa Kingdom. I hope they do not attract too much attention.”

“Yeah, we caused a big ruckus. But this isn't really our fault, okay? We just took on the request and had Flatorte do a little of her cold breath.”

If I knew a risk like this was part of the deal, then I wish the client would've said something about it.

“Indeed. I shall trust you; I know you are not a liar,” Beelzebub said. “Also, I've had one more thing on my mind since going to the kingdom.” She gave another irritated sigh. “The queen had removed her own head and was playing with it... Any idea why? Was she playing dullahan?”

“Is that seriously what she's up to?!”

I wondered if Muu discovered some weird, new hobby once her body fell apart... *Yeah, hopefully she puts her head back on soon; that's too much for me...*

I then felt someone looking at me from underneath the table.

Rosalie's face was poking out from the floor. “Aww, you can do that when you have a physical body? I wanna try taking my head off sometime, too,” she whined.

“Wait, you know you can’t usually do that with a physical body, right? You’d die the second you took it off!”

Considering how drastically Flatorte’s personality changed for a short while after breathing too much cold breath, I figured it’d be a good idea to be more careful of the consequences of our “favors.”



WE ALMOST ENTERED A CASHLESS SOCIETY



That day, Halkara was working from home, so she stayed in the dining room after breakfast.

There were piles of notebooks on the table, labeled with words like *Accounts* and *Financial Reports* and *Proceeds*.

“Oh... This is such a pain... What a massive headache... Is there any way to make this any easier...?”

“Oh yeah, it’s already winter. That time of year to get all your finances in order, hmm?”

I wasn’t in that department when I was a corporate slave, so I wasn’t really clear on the details, but the end of the year and the end of fiscal quarters were busy no matter where you were in the universe. They must divide the year around the same times, too. People would sure get confused if someone decided to cut their year into three-eighths...

Also, I should’ve mentioned this a while ago, but I’m really glad this world worked on a base ten system. If it was all base fourteen or something, I’d need another couple centuries to get the hang of it, I bet.

“I’ll leave this much of our sales with the bank... And we’ll put this in secure storage in the vault...”

“Sounds like you have a ton to take care of. Are all the cowlicks in your hair because of the stress, too?”

Places in Halkara’s hair were sticking up like she’d just woken up.

“Exactly. It is not easy to store all the money we’ve made~ We need a good vault to make sure no burglars get in, and the vault takes up acreage.”

“Acreage?”

“Yes. That is where we store all our coins, after all. Some vaults are like little seas of them.”

“Oh right! All your money is in coins!”

We had coins in my past life, but if you talked about large sums of money, you’d imagine light stacks of paper. A hundred thousand yen or a thousand dollars weren’t normally too heavy to carry. Nobody walked around with that amount in five-hundred-yen coins.

“Some provinces or regions have local paper currencies, depending on the lord’s policies. They are generally not very creditworthy, however. It was a bit before I was born, I think, but there was a regional lord that went bankrupt and his paper money became essentially worthless. The turmoil was awful.”

“Yikes.”

Regional currencies weren’t all that reliable after all.

But maybe people were more trusting of real coins, at least, even if they were heavier. The world I used to live in centered mainly on physical coins for a really long time.

“Back when I was working in Hrant, I always bought gold ingots and silk thread in case my money lost value, but...that’s such a difficult thing to take care of.”

“Money problems can get heavy, huh?” I didn’t mean for it to come across quite so flippant, but witches didn’t pay much attention to money.

Our work was nothing compared to Halkara’s, who was running a whole factory.

The cashless society still hadn’t made its arrival here yet.

Still, opening all the notebooks to calculate felt more pastoral and more of a relief than struggling to work in front of a computer.

Sometimes an email would come right before it was time to go home for the day, and replying to that would only delay going-home time, but then as you were writing the response to the first email, another one came... But not here.

—Then there came a voice from the garden.

“Here, a gift. Your fertilizer.”

“Thanks. Demons are so generous.”

“I am quite rich, you know.”

Beelzebub was here—or I hoped it was her. It’d be super weird if that was Natalie from the guild; I didn’t know if I’d trust a guild staff member who talked so pompously.

Not long after, Beelzebub came into the house. I’d already taken a head start to get the tea going.

“I am here~ Ah, I wasn’t expecting to see you at this hour, Halkara. Taking the day off, are we?”

“It’s a desk-work day today. I’m planning on doing employee assessments later, so I thought it would be best to do so in a place without any of my employees.”

Ah. Not only was she doing her accounts, but she also didn’t really want anyone else to be seeing her.

“I never know when you’re going to show up, Beelzebub.”

“I had to work over the weekend some time ago, so I am using my compensatory days off. In my position, I am often obligated to attend events that occur on holidays.”

They sure were cultured, considering they were giving her compensatory days off. Working on weekends and holidays didn’t mean that she should get fewer days for herself.

“Oh yeah—is it accounting season for the demons, too?”

Beelzebub’s expression suddenly turned into something unbelievably terrifying. “...I’m gonna \$#@\$&!*% kill the audit bureau!”

“Yikes, you scared me there!”

“My apologies. ’Twas just a little bout of frustration. ♪”

I get being frustrated, but I could tell this was serious.

“You see, they are in the process of developing a new form of accounts

management. I brought it with me today. It quite nicely solves the problem of jangling change.”

“Oh, are you switching to paper bills as your main deal?”

The demons struck me as the type to put that into practice first.

“We had a brief demonstration experiment with those in the past, but they would instantly burn up in the hands of fire salamanders, so we canceled it.”

So many kinds of people fell under the *demon* umbrella, so I could see the trouble with that... That was a problem only the most diverse societies would have.

“Additionally, the problem of counterfeit bills was quite the hassle. Someone once hired experienced dwarven craftsmen to print bills even more exquisite and refined than the real articles. The counterfeits then held more value, which made the chaos worse. The problem was that the criminal organization hired a craftsman who was *too* skilled.”

“There’s so much to comment on, I honestly don’t know where to start.”

“He made an impressive-looking watermark with a simple woodblock. The counterfeits had the demon crest as a watermark on it, so one could tell right away it was fake.”

“What were they thinking, putting a watermark on their fakes?!”

Why would they go out of their way to make it obvious?

“As I said, the problem is that they hired a craftsman much too skilled. He was motivated to make an article of a better quality than the original, and the bills ended up an exquisite piece of paper. There was even a myth that the cat drawn onto the bills came alive and leaped out of the image.”

I had no idea if this guy was a genius or an idiot.

“After that craftsman was arrested, he was forced to work as an engineer at the mint.”

“The demon government does whatever it wants, huh...”

“Anyway, paper bills are not in circulation among the demons. No matter how

nice an article is, there is always someone out there to create a copy. On the other hand, the cost performance of creating coins is not optimal for anyone to create fakes. 'Tis not worth it."

Right, no one would make fake hundred-yen coins if it cost five hundred yen to do it.

"Well, that was a rather long explanation, but here is the new technology that solves the coinage problem." Beelzebub produced a single card.

There was a magic circle drawn onto the face of the card. It reminded me of the demons' magic—but not quite the same.

"Did you work with the Thursa Thursa Kingdom to develop this?"

"We did not work together, no, but we referenced their technology. In the future, we may be able to pay for everything with this one single card. Although it would take quite a long while to have our society as a whole accomplish that."

Were they really planning on bringing a cashless society to life?

When I looked at Beelzebub's proud expression, I could tell that there was incredible technology behind that little thing.

The demon kings had kept demon society in peace and stability for a long time, so they could drastically change all their payment methods without having their creditworthiness plummet. In that regard, it would make it very easy to revolutionize how they paid for things.

But when I looked at the card, I didn't know what to say. I wasn't exactly sure what made it amazing.

"Don't the stores need payment devices?" I asked. "The card wouldn't work without one of those, right?"

She showed us the card, but obviously, to us, it just looked like a card. Plus, the store would have to buy the infrastructure for them, so I could see shop owners hesitant to adopt them.

"What is this nonsense of which you speak? I will show you exactly how amazing this card is. You may express your grievances afterward."

Oh, so she did come here to show it off.

“Halkara, I purchased three cases of Max Heart Nutri-Spirits on my tab the other day, did I not?”

Hey, I didn't know Halkara made different versions...

“Oh, yes, you did. It is on your tab. You will be paying later since you only have demon currency.”

Halkara remembered, too. I guess regular customers could set up a tab?

“I shall pay all I owe you right now. Hah!” Beelzebub's hair lifted into the air a bit as the whole area around her crackled with energy. “Haaaaaaaah!!”

For some reason, Halkara's documents laid out on the table started floating, too.

Why was this starting to look like a scene from an action manga?!

“Wh-what is going on?!” Halkara was shocked, too.

This isn't what I normally imagine when you talk about paying a tab...

“Silence. I must concentrate, lest it fail. Haaaaaa!”

Beelzebub whipped up the hand with the card into the air and—

“Yaaaah! Appear before meeee!”

She slammed down the card.

When she did, coins suddenly appeared from out of it!

And not just one or two—a whole pile of them!

As Halkara and I watched this happen, Beelzebub's battle mode (or whatever this behavior was) also came to an end. Her hair fell back down into its normal style, too.

“Aye, a success. Confirm the amount is correct, Halkara.”

“Huh? Oh...okay! One, two, three, four...” Halkara started counting her coins. “Exact change! You have paid fourteen thousand four hundred gold for three cases of Max Heart Nutri-Spirits!”

Her voice went higher. That was how surprising this whole thing was.

“What? What just happened? You made money from nothing?”

Society would be thrown into chaos if that were the case, but it wasn't totally beyond the realm of possibility for this ancient magitech...

“Fool. Society would be thrown into chaos if I created money from nothing,” Beelzebub replied. Of course a minister would have economic sense.

“Then where'd all that money come from? I can't tell where its source is. This isn't an illusion, is it?” I asked.

“I cannot accept an illusion! You must pay real money!” Halkara cried in alarm.

“What a foolish thing for me to do. What about any of that would be new technology? Using illusions to avoid actual payment is thousands of years old—one of the oldest criminal tricks in the book.”

“Ah, the classics...”

There was illusion magic in this world, so anyone could have done something like that. In Japan terms, that would be like a fox or tanuki using a leaf as money.

“That is legitimate money of the human government. The new technology is that I manifested it with this single card.” Beelzebub smugly crossed her arms. She could sit down now, if she wanted to.

“Okay, then tell us about this new coin-manifesting technology. How'd you do it?”

“Oh-ho-ho. You want to know, do you? Hmm? You want to know? Very well, then I shall tell you about our transcard system.”

I wanted to know, and good thing, because if I didn't, she'd get super angry... I didn't really have a choice.

And Beelzebub finally sat in a chair. “A unique magic circle is drawn onto this card. The same magic circle is in one of the rooms of my house.”

“Yeah, I got that much.”

Beelzebub nodded. “So by holding the card and activating the magic, it connects with the circle in my house and teleports the exact amount of money I need here!”

“Oh! It’s a type of summoning spell!” I had no idea you could do that.

I knew the demons had summoning magic, like the kind I used to bring Beelzebub over. They were using it to summon coins now.

“Put simply, yes. However, in the summoning magic of yore, one must draw the circle and recite the incantation for each individual use. A failure could result in the summoned target appearing in the wrong place and whatnot.” I had the sense Beelzebub might be glaring at me, so I looked away. “Some summoned people may end up in the bath and emerge completely soaked, for example.”

“Wow! Has that ever happened?” I asked aloofly. For various reasons.

“You could at least stand to drain the water from the bath beforehand.”

“Oh, whatever! It’s all *water under the bridge* now! Ha-ha!”

Pronunciation for demon magic was hard. I couldn’t help it.

“That goes to show just how difficult summoning magic is. Not only that, but coins are small. A shift could be catastrophic if, for example, you went to pay at the tavern, but the money appeared in the establishment next door.”

“Right. You have to get the money to the person you’re paying.”

If you dropped it on the wrong table, someone would just swipe it.

“Also, the older summoning magic would have manifested a single coin, but a whole selection of specific coins would have been too complicated.”

“Oh right, because you’d be summoning multiple targets simultaneously...”

“It would take an impractical amount of time and energy to summon seven individual one-hundred-gold coins seven different times. That said, even with the ability to summon multiple coins at once, it was essentially impossible to produce the exact amount needed to pay. However”—Beelzebub stuck out her card to us—“with this transcard, one can do all that!”

The card, with its simple magic-circle design, started to look like a vast treasure vault.

“Oh-ho, Miss Beelzebub, does that mean that if I place many coins into a room with a corresponding magic circle, I can draw out the exact amount of money for my accounts?” Halkara seemed to have a perfect grasp on the card, too.

“Exactly. You can do all the shopping you like without carrying around a single coin, all with this one card! 'Tis an invention of dreams!”

And that claim was hardly an exaggeration.

It was tremendously freeing to be able to walk around without carrying your money with you. People would be thankful, especially when paper bills had proven to be a nonstarter. Coins were really heavy...

“Oh, I can imagine so many uses. Simply carrying the amount we made in sales to the bank has always been a big job~ And then bandits could attack... I could move all the sales money to the bank with the card!”

“You *would* get attacked by bandits, wouldn't you?”

“It's only happened three times so far!” Halkara held up three fingers with her left hand.

“That's still a lot!”

She was always having a hard time with one thing or another, to the point that I was starting to wonder if she was born under some unlucky alignment of the planets.

“Of course, I could hire people to carry it safely, but the costs are quite steep, and one of the guards could be a bandit themselves. That did happen once.”

This world suddenly felt a lot more fantasy-esque. It was hard to imagine a security company actually being a part of a bandit organization. Guess it was a thing in the Middle Ages.

“But I can prevent that danger with that card!”

“Indeed. This will not be just a revolution in payment but a revolution in distribution!” Beelzebub was practically floating with rapture now, but I left her

to her euphoria.



A revolution in distribution was far from unusual. This technology would allow a delivery mage to show up empty-handed, then produce whatever it was the customer ordered right on their doorstep.

Mail shopping would get a refresh, basically.

Also, mail orders already existed—it was wyverns that typically delivered. We used this service ourselves sometimes.

The problem was that things could get quite expensive; it wasn't a service universal to everyone.

But a delivery person could carry around just the one card, and all those travel barriers would practically vanish.

Now that was truly incredible!

I quickly described my own thoughts on this game-changing development to Beelzebub.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho~ Do you see what I mean now? Do you see~? Yes, such things may be possible not too long from now. History is changing~”

Beelzebub looked even more confident than before.

I had no idea that one ancient civilization could grease the wheels of society so much. I guess these things happened when you lived a long time.

“I wonder if someday in the near future, I'll take a single card shopping to Flatta. A lot can change in three hundred years.”

“Please let me see it, Miss Beelzebub!” Halkara pointed to the transcard on the table. She was way more keen on issues of money than I was.

“...Go on, then.”

I wondered why Beelzebub had paused before she answered. Halkara wasn't well versed enough in magic to steal the technology; pharmaceuticals and magic were totally different concepts.

But the reason behind that soon became clear.

The moment Halkara took the card in her hands—

—the card crumbled to pieces, like paper to sand, and spilled all over the table!

“Ahhhhhh! It’s so brittle! More than brittle! What is this?!” Halkara screamed. There was nothing in her hands anymore, and what used to be the card was now a pile of medicine-like powder on the table. “Oh dear! We should sweep it up, quickly!”

Fwooo!

A breeze came in through the open window and blew the little pile away...

“It’s gone... Like it was built to destroy evidence of itself...,” I wondered.

“Oh no, oh no... Don’t tell me that those with sinful hearts destroy the card by touching it...”

“Aren’t you embarrassed to say things like that, Halkara?”

That was a bit beyond self-deprecating. But at least she wasn’t constantly preening about being the finest elf ever created...

Beelzebub sighed, apparently expecting this.

“No need to worry, Halkara. The same would have happened even if you did have a pure heart.”

So you think she has a sinful heart, too, huh?

“The card carries quite unique magic on it, but the paper fibers cannot withstand the burden. It crumbles to bits once it’s been used.”

It’s disposable?!

“Then why not draw the magic circle on metal?”

Beelzebub shook her head. “The card requires a delicate magic circle, so it is not possible with metal. It must be paper.”

“O-okay, then... Well, paper is light, so you could carry around as many as you need for how many payments you’d be making...”

“It costs time and money to apply such a special magic circle, you see, so one card costs about three million gold.”

“Then you’d walk around with coins anyway!”

Even though it was only in the experimental phases, that was still way too expensive. People could live an entire year on the cost of the card alone.

“And there is another problem.”

Uh-oh, what else?

My view of a card-based society was rapidly vanishing into the distance.

“Only those of the highest standing who can use summoning magic—one in ten thousand demons—can use it.”

“Now it sounds like a sword only the chosen one can use!”

Even being able to use the card was a status symbol now (unlike premier credit cards, the base assumption is that you *can’t* use one)...

“There are yet other drawbacks here...” Beelzebub’s head drooped.

“Okay, well, you’ve already given us enough problems that no one will want one anyway.”

This was starting to sound like an exchange of trade secrets.

“No, this...has to do with all of you, so you must listen to me.”

How were we involved with any of this?

“This is quite a unique spell, so one is beset by intense drowsiness after use... Ooh... This is worse than after working all through the night... My head feels so heavy...”

“The barriers are way too high for this!”

You really had to be ready to face the worst if you wanted to use this card.

“’Tis why I sat down... I will be unable to move from here... Carry me to the guest room when I fall asleep... Zzz...zzz...”

“You’d pass out on the floor if you used this in a shop!”

The only thing I felt now was the drive to make sure this card never got widespread use...

Beelzebub looked like she was fast asleep now, so I picked her up in my arms.

“Yeah, we’re a long ways off from a cashless society. It might not come for a very, very long time...”

Now I knew why Beelzebub went out of her way to come here.

She could only test it in places where she could afford to fall asleep, like at a friend’s house. If you invited someone to a café to talk about this, it’d only cause problems later.

“Agh! H-help me! Gaaah!”

“She’s even having nightmares!”

“Paladins from the audit bureau are attacking me! They will shout their spiteful nonsense at me again! Over and over!”

“Now she’s up against weird enemies!”

Was she conscious of how much she hated the audit bureau?

Did this mean that both humans and demons had money problems?

When I came back to the dining room, Halkara was silently checking over her documents.

“I knew something like that would be too good to be true. Administrative work must be done slowly and carefully. Even the most insurmountable pile of work will eventually come to an end if you take it one step at a time.”

“That’s right. But don’t work too hard.”

“I will do what I can to get one job done before dinner. I should make it at this rate.”

It was a good thing to set a time limit and not drag it out too late.

“I don’t allow work after meals anyway. You should be resting after you eat.”

“Yes, and how awful to do administrative work after getting drunk at dinner! I will not push myself too hard!”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

I had a feeling that getting drunk wasn’t great for her health, but maybe that was more normal for elves.



When the food was ready, I went to the guest room to check on Beelzebub. I had to see if she was going to eat dinner or not.

She was still tossing and turning. I called out to her, but it didn't seem like she was going to get up. I had no real choice but to let her sleep, what with all these nightmares. So should I forcibly wake her up instead?

"Damn! My attacks do nothing! Why are you doing this?! Why will you not accept these documents?! We do accounting work outside of our usual business as well! Will you not let this go?!"

"Hearing her talk normally (?) makes her seem more a corporate drone..."

That day, I felt a bit of sympathy with and compassion for Beelzebub.

"Oh, you two! You saved my life!"

Oh, good—glad her dream was working out.

I guess I'd just let her sleep, then.

"Falfa, Shalsha, I am so proud of you, my daughters!"

"You can't just claim them as your daughters in your dreams!"

"There, there, I shall distribute all my assets between the two of you. Aye, work hard, play hard~"

Wow, what a nice dream she's having. Yeah, I know it was just a dream, but it was getting on my nerves.

"Ah, you wonder how your auntie in the highlands is doing? Well, why don't we go visit her another time?"

Now *I'm* the auntie?!

"'Twould be a good thing to see your sister Sandra every now and again. Aye, we shall visit your aunt."

"All right, dinnertime! Yummy dinner's waiting for you! Wakey, wakey!"

I shook Beelzebub and didn't stop until she was awake.

"Mmh... I'm...in the house in the highlands... But I was just having the loveliest

dream.”

“Dinner’s ready, so I came to get you,” I said with a pleasant, surface-level smile.

“You did not wake me simply because you found my dream disagreeable, did you?” Beelzebub eyed me doubtfully.

“No? I don’t know what you were dreaming about.” I kept smiling. “C’mon, Falfa and Shalsha are waiting.”

A grin crossed Beelzebub’s face. “Indeed. I shall be at the table~ ♪”

Again, I was reminded that I couldn’t let my guard down around her as I watched her walk away with a spring in her step.

I had to stay alert to keep my priceless daughters safe.

The End





SOME LOCAL SPECIALTIES HAVE RULES THAT ALWAYS TRIP UP FIRST-TIMERS, RIGHT? —————

“—We honestly had an awful time when we got lost on Mount Shroom~ It was winter, so it was slowly getting colder and colder...”

“Huh. I, Flatorte the great dragon, can’t sympathize at all with your story.”

“I thought so... You can fly if you get lost, and you fare best in the cold...”

Hello, this is Halkara. Starting today, I’ll be on an overnight business trip on Miss Flatorte. A potential vendor in a Western province expressed interest in selling Halkara Pharmaceuticals products, so I am off to pay a visit. Time to expand my influence into the West!

“Gosh, it is honestly such a big help to have you and Miss Laika around. It was so difficult to go on business trips far away back when I was working in Hrant.”

“I’m happy to do it, as long as you feed me. I want to eat something new every now and then.”

I’ve managed steady success with Halkara Pharmaceuticals and built a Nutri-Spirits palace for my family (well, nothing quite *that* luxurious), but— When the great demon Beelzebub collapsed after drinking Nutri-Spirits, and I mistakenly believed I had to flee from her wrath, I left my homeland, and I now live in the house in the highlands in the province of Nanterre.

Now, Azusa, the Witch of the Highlands, is my teacher, and I’ve built a new Halkara Pharmaceuticals factory here in Nanterre. One thing led to another, and another, and another, and now that we’ve welcomed a second dragon into the family, Miss Flatorte, Halkara Pharmaceuticals will reach even greater heights!

After all, I’m riding on her back right now!

“...By the way, aren’t you going a little fast, Miss Flatorte...?”

The wind on my face was starting to hurt.

“But you’re not gonna make your meeting if we go any slower. I took off assuming we’d be flying at this speed the whole time.”

“Then we should have left a little earlier!”

The wind was smacking me in the face! My hair would most certainly look like a mess after this... I’d have to readjust myself once we arrived; otherwise the client might think a banshee had come for the meeting...

My business trip to the Western region was just beginning—but it was not going to be a comfortable trip...



“Oh, Halkara. Work’s done?” said Flatorte as I met her outside of the castle.

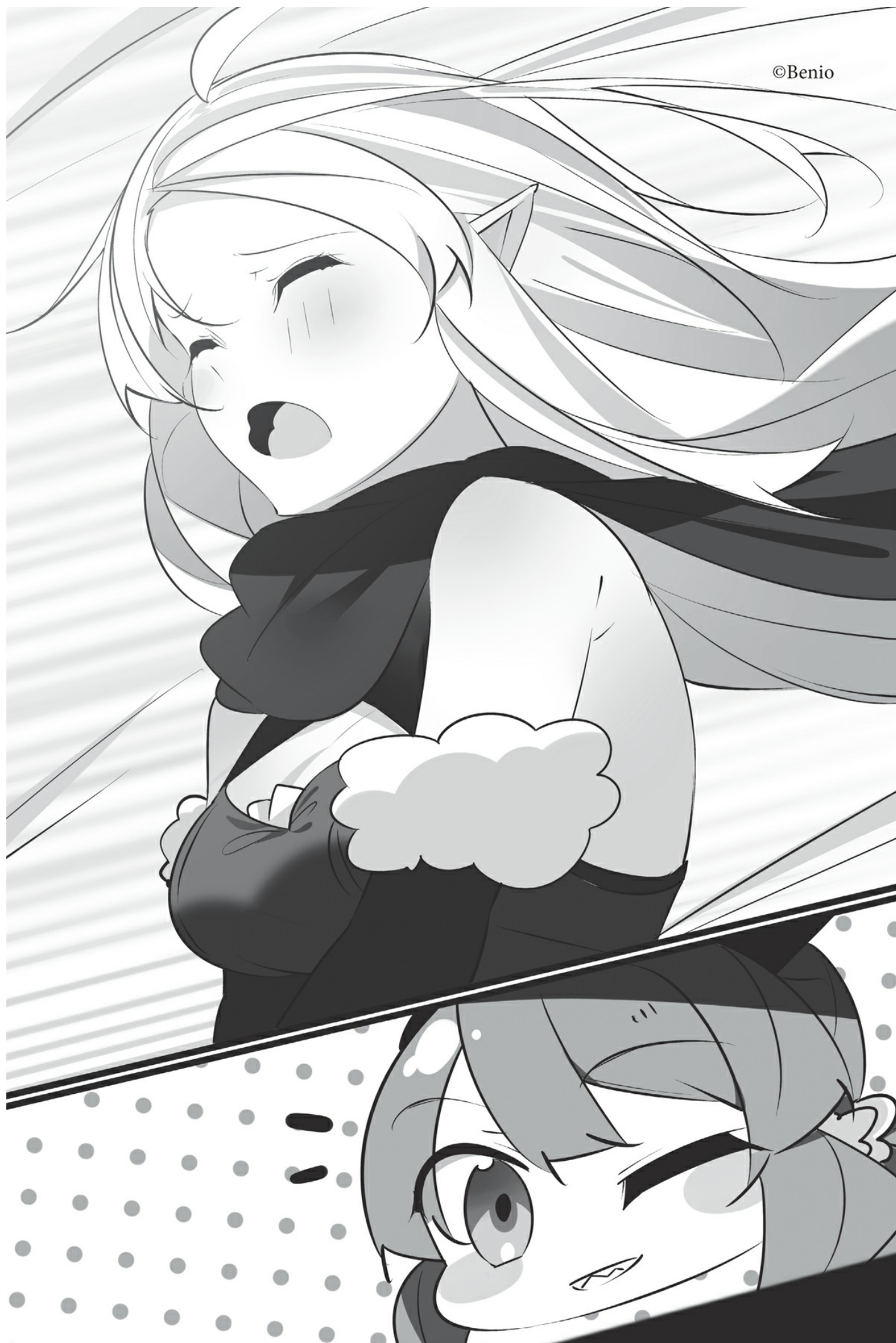
“Yes, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. This castle is just marvelous, isn’t it~?”

“It was great! Unlike museums, these places are extremely exciting to me, the great Flatorte!”

We had come to a city named Funaye in the province of Dohan.

After all was said and done, the place to see here was Funaye Castle. The red-painted walls gave it a certain air of dignity.

The great feudal lord who once ruled over this land built it, but official city affairs had been moved to a different building, so now one could pay money to see the inside.



“It is quite imposing~ You don’t often see castles painted such a bright color.”

“Yeah. Red reminds me of red dragons, so I’d like it even more if they painted it blue instead.”

That would be a little spooky...

“Well, since we’re here, I want to take a look inside the castle, too, but”—I weakly pressed my hands against my stomach—“I’m.....hungry.”

Looking around the castle would mean lots of walking, which meant using up physical energy... I wouldn’t be able to really get a good look around without anything in my stomach.

“Then it’s chow time! Let’s go!”

“Yes. Let’s eat our fill!”

Business work was important, but I was not going to be careless about my food, either. Meals in faraway places were a lovely chance to try something completely different!

“We’re in a sightseeing spot,” said Flatorte, “so there’s a street with a bunch of restaurants over there.”

“Tsk, tsk. The truly delicious local cuisine would not be found in a restaurant for tourists. They are counterfeit, you could call them. Fakes.”

“Huh. Well I, the great Flatorte, will wolf down any kind of meat, real or fake.”

“I can appreciate your student-like approach, but today we will be enjoying local cuisine. So let us head for downtown!”

“I’m fine with that. Downtown’s not that far from here.”

As we walked around downtown Funaye, we spotted a restaurant-bar-looking establishment that had opened for the noon crowd. The building practically screamed that it had been in business for a very long time.

“All right, we’ll go here! This is what we want to find!”

“It doesn’t look very interesting. Are you sure it’s good?”

“This is an establishment loved by the locals. It is a much safer bet than a

newly opened restaurant trying to succeed with some gimmick! It's also along a major road, so it must make money, too. No hobbyists here!"

"You noticed a lot from just one look."

"Elves live for a long time, too... I've experienced quite a bit..."

"Let's go in, then."

When we opened the door, the interior definitely belonged to a local eatery. "Welcome. Party of two, is it? Please take a seat at one of the tables back here~" The proprietress, a woman about thirty in human years, hospitably guided us to our table.

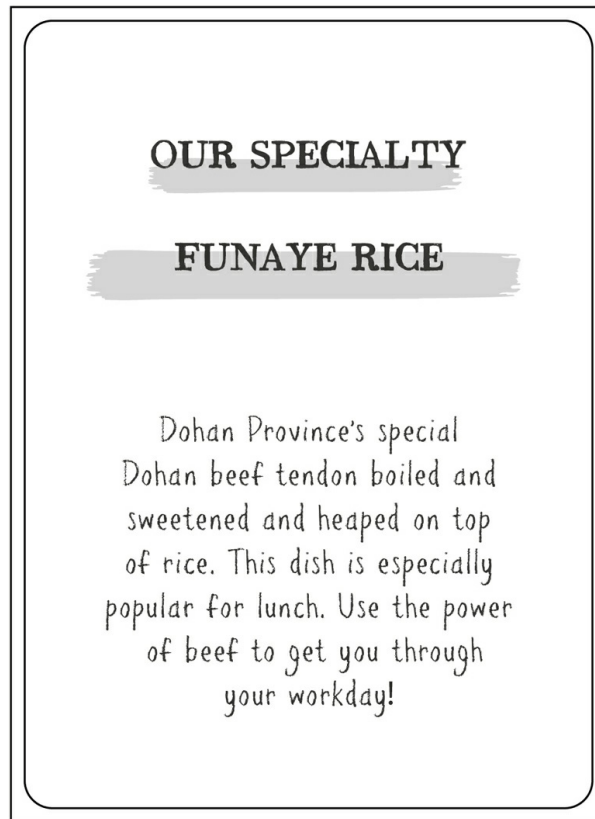
Everything was in place. My hopes were already rising! Now we would take our seats and check the menu.

I would love to try a dish that we can only get here~ Let's see, ham and eggs, sausages...

"Huh? This is all so mundane..."

Maybe this establishment was so local that they only offered ordinary food? Had I made another blunder?

"Hey, this Funaye rice sounds pretty good."



Flatorte was pointing at a dish with a local-sounding name.

“The area around here not only uses lots of bread, but tons of rice, too. Meat on rice sounds delicious! Especially the meat!”

I see. Flatorte was a big eater, and she seemed to favor this kind of thing. The ingredients were local, too. But what I was looking for wasn’t a unique menu item of new ideas but a dish that had been a part of this culture for ages...

I suppose it’s more interesting than a regular set anyway... I would most likely go with that as well. I needed something more exciting, however, so I decided to search for something else I’d never heard of before. There must be something on the menu.

Oh, there it is, under the side dishes: Bokkake—350 gold.

What an odd-sounding name. This was it! This was what I should be ordering!

“I’ve decided, Miss Flatorte.”

“Right. I’m gonna have two Funaye rices.”

She sure eats a lot...

I placed an order of Funaye rice and bokkake with the proprietress.

She smiled. “You sure like meat, don’t you?” This was all Flatorte’s fault...

Five minutes later, our Funaye rice arrived: a neat pile of rice and a heap of soft-simmered beef on top.

If it tastes as good as it looks, we hit the jackpot!

Flatorte immediately reached for a spoon and shoveled it into her mouth.

“Mm! It’s sweet, spicy, and delicious!” I took a bite as well. “You’re right! The meat is sweet and spicy. It blends perfectly with the rice!”

The boiled beef had quite a lot of moisture in it, which the rice absorbed to create a perfect harmony.

I doubted the boiled sweet-spicy meat would go very well with any kind of bread, but it was a perfect match with rice. This dish might have been created with rice in mind.

“Exactly! Nice, thick steaks are great, but I love sweetened meat dishes, too! I’m so glad I ordered two!”

“I doubt anyone besides you would be able to eat two of these... But I am glad to see you are happy.”

“And this beef would go great with some beer.”

I was thinking the same thing. “Yes. It’s seasoned quite richly; I think some drinks would be an excellent accompaniment.”

Then, the proprietress came to us again, bearing Flatorte’s second helping of Funaye rice.

“Here we go, another Funaye rice.” She laid down the plate in an empty spot on the table. “And one bokkake.”

Here it is! The mysterious bokkake has arrived!

Now what would it turn out to be?

The best part of traveling was discovering new foods!

What sat on the small plate—

—was the same boiled beef tendon from the Funaye rice.

“What...? This is bokkake...?”

“Yes. Funaye rice is bokkake on rice. It was originally what we served to our employees here at the restaurant.”

It turned out to be the exact same thing!

I’d ordered what we were already eating!

“Bokkake was originally created when we were trying to make all our extra meat even more delicious, and now the bokkake itself has gained some popularity. I am very happy to see you order more of it as a side dish!”

No, Miss Proprietress, that’s not it... I simply ordered the wrong thing...

I took a bite of the bokkake. It just tasted like Funaye rice, but without the rice.

If I had known this would happen, then I should’ve just asked. To think I would fall into such a trap...

“Both servings were delicious! I almost want to eat this back at home in the highlands!”

My only salvation was how delighted Flatorte was with her meal...

“Halkara, you’ve got business in Titteria Province tomorrow, right? I hope we eat some good stuff there, too. I’ll leave the restaurant scouting to you,” Flatorte said, her mouth still full of food.

Indeed. We still have plenty of chances to make this right.

I will not mess up next time; we will get our local cuisine! We will have our revenge yet!



That night, Flatorte and I entered Titteria Province. The carriages would have been a full day slower; many thanks to Flatorte for such efficient travel.

“Wow, this city is a crammed mess. And the colors are all over the place.” Flatorte was looking at the city around us. I could see her point.

“Titteria is the center of the Western commercial union. Today, it’s still an autonomous city of merchants. The spirit of commerce runs deep here.”

The capital city of Titteria Province, Titteria, had several rivers weaving across it, which made it perfect for shipping. It was even near the ocean as well.

“Whooooaaa! Those clothes look awesome!”

“Where?”

“Look, there’s a big tiger on this! What a powerful look!”

“Well... I don’t think it’d look very good on you...”

“But there’s a lady over there with a tiger on the back of her shirt!”

I remembered the legend then; they said that when the merchants of Titteria were once about to be subjugated by the army of a great feudal lord, they dressed all their mercenaries in clothes with animal faces to make them look brave, then beat back the enemy in a flawless battle. Maybe this was deeply rooted in their history.

“But, Miss Flatorte, wouldn’t you rather buy some clothes with a dragon?”

“Now that you mention it, I would. But I don’t see anyone around here wearing dragon clothes.”

“I suppose you’d have real dragons living in such a big city... Maybe those dragons would find it strange... Anyway, let’s save our search for local cuisine for tomorrow—tonight, I’d like to drink.”

Flatorte’s eyes glittered. “I’ll join you! Whatever’s over there smells great!”

She was looking at an idol of the god Grico—legend has it he ran for three hundred days straight.

There was also the statue of the god Do-kura, who took the shape of a crab and was said to have defeated an evil hydra by snipping it to pieces, and the statue of the blowfish Tetchiri, who was said to have taken down an evil whale with its poison stingers.

This holy street was full of god statues—some that resembled clowns, some that reminded me of goblins...

“You have a sharp eye. The divine street is said to be the most lively in all of Titteria. There should be something there for us. Let’s find a good place!”

“That’s what I want to hear! Let’s go!”

We walked for a little bit and found an exceptionally lively establishment.

The most popular fried skewers

THE COLOSSEUM

Judging from the picture drawn on the sign, this place offered fried skewers with sauce drizzled on top.

“This food will certainly go with a drink!”

“I could eat fifty of these. We’ll drink and drink and *eat!*”

The two of us marched right into the restaurant.

The establishment was nice and lively on the inside. This would be a fun place to get tipsy! We started off by ordering two of the ten-skewer sets and some drinks.

“Man, I can’t wait! Every blue dragon would like this! I can tell before we even take a bite!”

“I’m quite excited myself! All right, let me go pick some flowers before the food comes.” (That’s how we elves talk about going to the restroom.) I used the toilet and made sure I took the opportunity to wash my hands before our meal. There were some things in the house in the highlands that seemed crude, but elves were clean. Plus, I was the president of a company whose products people put in their mouths.

I looked in the bathroom mirror to give myself a little pep talk. I made a mistake during lunch by ordering the same thing twice, but now was my redemption! And tomorrow would be a big success!

“I will do my absolute best, both in my business talks *and* for lunch! Whoop, whoop!”

With a proud smile, I left the bathroom and returned to my seat.

Flatorte was fighting with one of the staff members!

What?! I was only gone for a few minutes?!

She couldn't have gotten cranky and drunk and started trouble yet!

"Ma'am, the sign here clearly says that there is no double-dipping in the sauce!"

"You think I read that? You have to tell me ahead of time! I don't know these things!"

"It says that at the front of the store and at the counter!"

"I, the great Flatorte, make it a point never to read the signs! It's my choice whether to read it or not!"

This restaurant had its own rules—and a potentially fatal one for first-timers!

"Hey, did you hear? That tourist's been double-dipping."

"We're tourists, too, but at least we know that double-dipping is bad."

"Everyone knows any real skewer joint has the 'no double-dipping' sign."

"You know, I'm glad we got to see someone get yelled at for this."

The commentary from the other customers made it sound like it was a basic rule...

In that case, the one complaining about it was the one embarrassing herself.

"Miss Flatorte, let's just acknowledge our mistake. It doesn't cost anything to apologize," I intervened.

"I don't accept that! If you're not letting anyone double-dip in your sauce, then either offer something to drizzle or put bottles of the sauce on the tables! You're just asking people to double-dip if you fill a whole box full of sauce!"

Her logic was sound to me, but the other customers were laughing.

"Dunking the whole thing in a big tub is the point!"

"You're not getting the real experience if you're just drizzling a bit of sauce on. We aren't even from here!"

Oh, please. If you are tourists, then refrain from talking as if you know everything.

"Hold up a second here."

A tough-looking swordsman with a shaved head and scarred face stepped forward.

Oh gosh, he must've been working as an adventurer for a very long time here! He would know every single booze dispensary in town! If someone like him was getting involved, we could be in danger!

"Sir, this dragon-lady has a point. You both have good intentions, so why don't both of you apologize and settle this nicely, yeah?"

Once the tough-looking swordsman showed up, the staff member immediately folded. "You're right..."

"I won't make the same mistake again...," said Flatorte.

Wow! Very well done, terrifying swordsman!

"Thank you very much for your help!" I said graciously. I was used to bowing in gratitude in my line of work.

"I've come from far away, too, so I just wanted to relax and enjoy my food. That's all."

He was a tourist, too?! I honestly thought he was a regular!

Afterward, our set of ten skewers came, but—

"Oh, there are twelve on here."

"I'm really sorry about earlier. I gave you two extra." The staff member winked at us. Exceptional service.

The skewers themselves went supremely well with our drinks.

"You really do have to dunk these fried skewers in sauce for it to truly shine. They wouldn't be nearly as delicious if you just drizzled them. ♪"

Flatorte had a wonderful time eating and drinking. All's well that ends well.

And speaking of things that end well, I'm going to make tomorrow's lunch a success, too!



The next day, I successfully wrapped up my business talks in the morning—And for lunch, Flatorte and I walked around Titteria's cathedral shopping street.

“This is a really long street. Really impressed they got this many stores in here.”

“The cathedral sits right at the end, so I’ve heard that the road leading to it ended up lined with shops. In fact, I have heard it’s the longest in the entire kingdom. I believe we should find a very fine establishment here.”

Once we were done eating, I would hop onto Flatorte’s back and return to the house in the highlands. This was our last chance on this trip.

We will reach a successful conclusion! We will have a perfectly flawless lunch!

As we walked along the street, we spotted an unfamiliar term: *lyke cakes*.

We found signs advertising them not only at the front of restaurants but at smaller cafés as well. It sounded like this was the local delicacy. Some signs included illustrations of a round, pancake-type thing with meat and vegetables inside.

“All right, let us finish off by trying out these lyke cakes!”

“But there are tons of shops selling them. I have no idea if this means they’re all good or what.”

“My basic rule of thumb is that we must choose an establishment that is clearly loved by the locals.”

As we passed by one establishment, I got a peek into its little window. Inside, it appeared to be a café restaurant, and since it was lunchtime, 80 percent of the seats were taken.

That meant people were coming here because it had good food, not just because it was a café.

Not only that, a merchant-like man with a large belly just happened to leave the restaurant, patting his stomach with great satisfaction.

If this place was good enough to satisfy him, then I doubted we’d have trouble with the serving sizes, either.

“I believe we’ve found what we’re looking for! Let’s go in!”

“Got it. I trust your judgment, Halkara.”

We opened the door to the restaurant and heard the satisfying ring of a bell overhead.

“Party of two! Take a seat over there!” the hostess called energetically.

After many years of failure, I, too, have matured. I chose many a terrible establishment and found disappointment when I lived in Hrant, but I would not make those mistakes again.

No—all those mistakes had led to all the skill I have now! My mistakes and blunders had served as my fertilizer! Flowers still bloom after failure!

A flower that blooms from failure—now that is a nice proverb, if I do say so myself. I’ll put that up in the factory as our slogan some other time.

As I examined the lunch menu, I could see that the lyke cake lunch set was six hundred gold, and that lyke cake on its own was also six hundred gold.

“Looks like the set’s a better value for lunch.”

“Indeed. I suppose this means we should choose the lyke cake lunch set.”

Lyke cakes appeared to be some variety of pancake, so a set meal would most certainly come with other side dishes.

We ordered two lyke cake lunch sets, and I was excited to find out what we would be eating.

The server returned with our food quite fast; I suppose this was their lunchtime turnaround.

“Here you are! Two lyke cake sets!”

It was time to get our fill and then head home!

Next to the lyke cake was...a heaping bowl of rice and some soup.

Huh...? We have one grain accompanied by another...? Carbohydrates with more carbohydrates?

“Um, excuse me? What comes with the lyke cake in the set?”

“The set comes with rice and soup.”

How voluminous! Of course one would eat their fill!

“Are y’all tourists here? That lyke cake lunch set is typical around here.”

“I—I see... Oh, it’s not a problem... Thank you for the food...”

I was hoping to have a grand finale, but once again, we were at the whims of the local rules...

It was practically unheard of to eat a wheat-based food with rice, even in areas that ate mostly rice. I wasn’t so sure about this... Wasn’t this unbalanced...?

However—I was the only one who felt like this was a mistake.

“Oooh! Now this would make any dragon happy! A hundred times more energy!”

Flatorte immediately cut her sauce-covered lyke cakes into squares, put it on her rice, scooped it all up with her fork, and put it in her mouth.

“Oh yeah! The rich sauce makes this perfect!”

Flatorte hadn’t seen this as a failure at all.

Indeed. If everyone disliked it, then it would not have established its roots as a dish in this area in the first place. The people of Titteria didn’t see a problem with lyke cake and rice. Was I trying to force it into my narrow worldview?

I had to try it first. Innovation is only born from courage! Even failed flowers bloom!

I was surprised to see that my proverb was already applicable... Not that it really mattered...

Time to see if this flower will bloom!

I also placed my lyke cake on the rice and put it in my mouth.

Oh, the sauce most certainly went delightfully with the rice!

“This is good! This set works!” I set out to conquer this double-carb meal, unintimidated by Flatorte.

“You sure are eating a lot today, Halkara! You’re like a dragon!”

“Of course! I’m still a growing girl!”

That was when I noticed the bottle of sauce sitting on the table. That was most certainly the extra sauce for the lyke cakes, but... I could use it in other ways.

I drizzled it over my rice. Behold, the saucy rice!

“Ooh! This can work, too!”

“Hey, that’s a good idea! I’m gonna try that!” Flatorte delightfully poured the sauce over her rice, too.

Yes, a meal you eat with a smile is the best kind!

And so we cleaned the plates in our lyke cake lunch sets perfectly!

Flatorte and I left the restaurant in high spirits.

Yes, only you can decide whether something was a success. The power to change failure into something positive rests in your hands.

I learned something quite important from the lyke cake lunch set.



“I’m sorry... Could you stop dipping and weaving so much...?” On the way back, I started to feel slightly nauseous... “I can feel my lyke cake coming back up...”

“I’m doing what I can, but the wind here is strong, so the turbulence is unavoidable. Just hold on tight so you don’t fall off.”

There was too much in the lyke cake lunch set after all...

“And if you throw up on me, I’m gonna dunk you like a skewer into a dirty bog for ten whole seconds as payback.”

“Yes, I will do my best...”

My face went pale, and I covered my mouth with my hand. I could not rely on spiritualism and mental power. It would be much safer to deal with this physically. I shouldn’t have stuffed myself before hopping on a dragon.

They often say that the journey home feels much shorter than the journey away, but for me, the return felt three times as long.

The grand finale, I suppose...?



☆My Memo☆

Restaurant-Bar in Downtown Funaye

Funaye Rice and Bokkake

Total: 1,100 gold

Who knew bokkake and Funaye rice would turn out to be the same thing?!

But I think it would go quite well with an alcoholic beverage. Meat dishes aren't so bad every once in a while. Lots of Western cuisine seems to be a bit sweet, doesn't it?

Also, we spotted the proprietress's child doing school homework at an open seat, which was adorable. I love those moments.



☆My Memo☆

Fried Skewer Stop: The Colosseum

Ten Skewer Set (with Two Freebies),
Extra Skewers, Salted Cabbage,
Various Drinks

Total: 2,500 gold

We were told to snack on salted cabbage between skewers to keep the meal from getting too heavy. The cabbage was tasty all on its own, too. So good. I almost wanted to order it by itself.

We also saw someone pay for a massive order.

"Your total comes to thirty-one million, five hundred thousand gold~"

"Sure, here's thirty-two million."

"Here's your change, five hundred thousand gold~"

Everything was done in the millions!



☆My Memo☆

Café Naomi

Lyke Cake Lunch Set

Total: 600 gold

The lyke cakes were actually quite thick and rather filling. There was also a good amount of cabbage in it—do the people here like cabbage?

The “mixed juice” seems to be rather popular, too.

I wonder what it's a mix of...



YOU STILL GET HUNGRY IN UNFAMILIAR FOREIGN LANDS, DON'T YOU?



Hello, it's me, Halkara the elf.

I know this is very sudden, but I have blinked and found myself standing in front of Harajuku Station.

My memory as to why I am here is fuzzy and hard to recall, but...I can read the word *Harajuku*. They are quite strange letters, but I know what they mean.

Two people passed by me—one person wearing an angel-like outfit and one dressed like a demon.

“Hey, is that a new spin on mori-girl fashion?”

“More like elf loli, don't you think?”

I had a feeling that others were talking about me, but they didn't seem bothered. I paid no mind to them.

I didn't have much of a destination—I had no idea where I was in the first place.

“I suppose I'll walk.”

Sometimes, a walk could tell you plenty about where you were. As a businesswoman, learning more about where I am was a basic skill.

I walked down a path called Takeshita Street, which was most crowded.

Along the way, some young girls stopped me.

They are wearing dark clothes like the demons do, but they seem to be human.

“Excuse me—you're so cute! Can I get a pic of you for my Insta?”

“You're getting a pick of me for... Am I being ritually sacrificed?”

“Oh my god, she’s totally in character! No worries; this won’t steal your soul!”

I wasn’t quite sure what was going on, but she captured an image of me.

“You wanna take one of me? Today, I’m going for the dark panda look. I came out from Matsudo!”

“Oh, I don’t have anything to capture images with. I don’t think any elf does. I’m from Nanterre Province.”

“You really have your character down! And your ears look so real!”

My incredibly mundane answers still earned me a compliment. I suppose this was a culture of positive reinforcement.

Afterward, many girls asked me for my image in a similar fashion. Everyone was so young, so perhaps they felt I was a kindred spirit.

Still, I had no idea where I was...

My memory was so muddled, I couldn’t remember...

I remember going to pick a rather large fruit, only to have it fall on my head... But after that, I’m not sure.

My next memory was of suddenly flying through a strange place, where I spoke to a divine-looking woman... And she said— **“You’re a member of Azusa’s family, aren’t you? Oh dear, you’re unconscious~ I doubt you’ll die from this, but why don’t you take a little trip to the era where Azusa lived until your memory comes back? Time gets all twisted in other worlds, so it won’t be any harm~ Let’s put you in a spot with plenty of other cute girls~”**

—Or something like that.

This was a supernatural phenomenon, wasn’t it...?

I doubted I would find Madam Teacher in such a strange land.

But my thoughts of her were soon superseded by a much more pressing danger!

“I’m.....hungry.”

In my aimless wandering, I soon found myself with an empty stomach.

But there were so many people that walking even a short distance took a surprising amount of energy, both physical and mental.

I must find a place to eat! There should be something good nearby!

A clothing store.

No, that's not it.

Another clothing store.

No, still not it.

A general store.

That's not it, either.

Haunted houses and escape rooms...? *What are those?*

Ah, it seems this area doesn't have many dining options...

All the establishments I'd seen were overall very cutesy and well decorated, too. I tended to trust restaurants that were sparser in decoration. Were there no places here run by a silent boss and a genial proprietress?

As I searched for a suitable place, a sweet scent wafted my way.

SWEETS BUFFET: PARFAIT DU CHERIE

"Oh, what's this? 'All you can eat for two hours! Welcome to a girl's dream'—"

The inside was overdecorated—most certainly not a spot a quiet old man would inhabit—and I could see groups of similarly overdecorated girls.

This was the opposite of what I expected, although I couldn't tell you exactly what made it so. Life was long for me, so perhaps I could afford to indulge my sweet tooth from time to time?

There was also something strange about this land, which meant I had a good chance of encountering many treats I had never seen before.

Time to go in! Everything is an experience!

I entered alone, and one of the staff members immediately guided me to my table.

I was informed that I could take as much food and drink as I liked.

Now that the buffet was open to me, I went straight for the sweets.

My eyes went wide!

I'd never seen any of these before! And they looked so cute!

To my side, there were girls capturing images with their special device—their smart phones.

From what I could tell, it was a special artifact for taking records. It also appeared to sell for about fifty million gold, so perhaps this establishment was a place for noble ladies? Or perhaps the excess of decoration was how they expressed their status as renowned mages?

Well, I had to eat my sweets.

I filled my plate with every single thing they had on offer. All the women around me had their sweets nicely arranged on their plates; I wanted to focus on my own plate, but I was a bit embarrassed about how sloppily mine were piled on. But I would keep going anyway!

The best thing about an all-you-can-eat buffet was that you could snag anything that caught your eye.

There was no need to worry about whether or not you would actually eat it. That was a big advantage.

Perhaps my company should try testing out a shop that offered Nutri-Spirits in an all-you-can-drink system. Although drinking ten in a row would certainly not be good for anyone's health... Never mind that one, then.

Time to sit back down and start round one of my buffet experience!

First, the macarons—I'd eaten these before. There was a shop that sold them in the Wellbranch Marquessate, but those were not so colorful.

The texture was wonderfully crispy! And it was so light; it felt as though I were eating a cloud.

Next was the apple pie.

Hmm, I'd unconsciously started with eating things I was already familiar with... Was this instinct? At least nothing on my plate looked particularly grotesque, so I wasn't worried about that...

Gosh, this must be the best apple pie I've had in my life!

How delicately sweet! And the crust was delicious... This was most certainly the golden ratio of flaky and moist!

Had I finally found the perfect establishment?

I see. Of course it would be filled with rich-looking young ladies!

Next up was a very luxurious-looking thing. They called this one a chocolate "parfait." It sat inside a tall, narrow glass made just for this purpose.

It is said that chocolate originated in the demon lands. It was originally not that sweet but apparently became sweeter and sweeter and eventually fell under the category of candy. We now occasionally ate it as such.

Though these were foreign foods, everything else had been sweet thus far, so I assumed this would be equally so.

Yet, I had picked something very large for a first-time taste test... The glass might be narrow, but it was still quite tall and filled to the brim...

I used the spoon to take my first bite.

"Why ish it sho cold?!" I exclaimed inadvertently. Several customers turned to look at me. Oh dear, was that uncouth...? Had I acted inappropriately for a high-class establishment? Was I going to be banned? But there was plenty of noise in the restaurant!

"Is she pretending she's never had ice cream before?"

"I'm starting to think she's the real thing."

"Dang, what a pro."

It seems it went over well with everyone else. Were elves this unusual around here? It was nice to be complimented simply by being an elf, at least. Even if I had startled myself eating something so cold.

This chocolate parfait was truly incredible.

The sweetness came right after the chill, and the white cream both softened the chill and changed the flavor slightly. The cookies stuck into it were also of high quality. This had been put together with the utmost care, down to the smallest details. It was almost maddening.

It was entirely possible that this city developed by specializing in sweets.

By the variety in the lineup alone, I could tell this was far beyond the efforts of one single chef. The only explanation was that this establishment received generous government funding.

I was going to leave the chocolate parfait for a bit and go for the pitch-black coffee jelly.

I was not entirely sure what “coffee” was—perhaps the mysterious ingredient that made it all black.

Oh, this was much more bitter than anything I’d had so far.

But it was the perfect amount of bitter, followed by a faint sweetness.

“I see, I see. I see how this is going~”

I finally understood. One’s mouth would grow numb from the overwhelming sweetness of things like the parfait, so this jelly was here as a palate cleanser. I was a genius for recognizing this on my own, wasn’t I? I could thrive in this foreign land!

The next thing on my list was this pink item called a strawberry milk crepe.

It was much too sweet. They put in an unbelievable amount of sugar into this!

And there was far too much cream in it as well, although the sweetness wasn’t terrible, either. All told, it was an elegant dish.

If I took this back to the house in the highlands, I could get Falfa and Shalsha hooked on this flavor. This was a devilish temptation indeed...

All right. I still had some chocolate parfait left, but my stomach would cool down if I stuffed myself with any more. I would tackle it a bit at a time. Now, it was about time for my second round at the buffet.

I might never get a better chance to eat however much I liked of whatever I liked.

But everyone else was desperate to get some sweets into their stomachs, too; the dessert corner was quite crowded.

I was feeling generous, so I decided to wait. I would wait as long as need be. Well, my all-you-could-eat time was limited to two hours, so maybe not that long.

But then I heard an unexpected name from the line by the buffet.

“Hey, I had no idea you’d show up, Azusa.”

What?!

Did I just hear Madam Teacher’s name?

“Well, I’m here. I know I’m a part of Aki’s group, but we’re not *that* close. It’s fine.”

“But won’t it be bad news if Aki finds out that you’re here with us?”

“Hmm, well, if that happens, then we’ll just say that the Wu and the Yue will still work together in the same boat.”

“Wait, then which of us is Wu and which of us is Yue?”

“That’s what you’re most curious about?! Is one of you better than the other?!”

It definitely sounded like her.

I looked over toward the conversation.

The group all wore the same clothes, and they all had long black hair. Perhaps they were a military group or a religious group.



She looked nothing like the Madam Teacher I knew. Even her hair color was different.

But the eyes of the woman named Azusa reminded me of Madam Teacher.

But I was probably only imagining that after hearing the name.

She must have realized I was looking at her, because our eyes suddenly met.

I looked away, uncomfortable.

And that was it. She was not a drunken adventurer, so she wasn't going to approach me simply because our eyes had met.

"What is it, Azusa?"

"Oh, nothing. I'm all good."

"Okay, I know I'm the one who invited you here so maybe I shouldn't say this, but you're too nice, Azusa. Definitely say no to things that make you uncomfortable."

"What is this, the buffet line lecture?"

"Listen to me. You're fine now, but when you get a job, you're the kind of person who'll get dumped with all the extra work. People die from that."

"Yeah, yeah. We appreciate your concerns, and we will do all we can to remedy the problem as soon as possible."

"You sound like a crappy customer service operator, ha-ha!"

By then, it was time for the girls to choose their sweets, and their conversation came to an end.

It was hard to get my mind off it, but I knew I was thinking too much. More importantly, I needed to consider how I was going to approach round two. A course meal is like a story, and I had to be conscious of what I was going to tell.

—I ended up with a mountain of food on my plate anyway.

I-it was all right, really! It was an all-you-can-eat buffet, so I didn't break any rules!

First, I chose the strange, yellow-colored thing I did not manage to snag the

last time. It was called kabocha squash pudding.

It appeared to include some kind of fruit I had never heard of, although they sometimes called it *kabocha* and sometimes *pumpkin*. Or at least, I believe it was a fruit. Did it not exist in my world?

I took a bite with a small spoon.

How soft! Just as soft as Madam Teacher!

How do I describe it—it was sweet, but the aftertaste was refreshing. It did not linger in the mouth at all. A blend of the feminine and the masculine. Very impressive, kabocha squash.

And so that led me to choose something called *pumpkin pie* next. Again, it was unclear whether the star ingredient was kabocha squash or pumpkin. I really wished they would label them consistently.

This was just as delicious! *Pumpkin, you are truly mysterious—but you are good!*

Next was sweet potato.

Its form was rather simple; are we sure this wasn't the one thing the reticent old man was making?

A job well done, then~!

This tasted as though it had taken a full hour to puree! It truly struck me as something a stubborn old man would make. I would eat plenty of it if I had it in my room.

I was next moving on to the core of my second round, which was a treat with a bit of height on it. This was called Mont Blanc.

I was unsure of what the name meant. Why was it capitalized? Was it a person's name? A place name? I was unsure. But what made it unique was the chestnut right on top. Perhaps the word meant *chestnut* or something of the sort.

It had also been placed in a very good spot. A CAKE CLASSIC! the sign had said. If it was a classic, then it must be good.

I quickly took a piece into my mouth with my fork.

Ah yes~ This one is soft, too~

Its texture was nothing like the pudding, but it was just as gentle and mild. It was the same with the sweet potato, but they were likely a break in flavors from the parfait.

The Mont Blanc cream was mild, so in between, I decided to take bites from the remainder of my chocolate parfait. It was the perfect thing to counteract its sweetness.

The final pieces of round two were cherry blossom *mochi* and *mitarashi dango*.

Mochi and *dango*—I'd heard those words before. Madam Teacher had mentioned them when she was making her edible slime treats. I could see now how similar they looked.

The reason I chose these to end the round was because they were at the farthest spot on the plate from me. If that is too mundane for you, then I have another, more uniquely elf-like reason, too.

The cherry blossom mochi was wrapped in a leaf. I suppose, as the name suggests, it was a cherry blossom leaf.

Also, it seemed there were two very different schools when it came to cherry blossom mochi, and the one I had on my plate belonged to the Domyoji temple school. I could tell that they were given names of temples for some reason.

I wasn't entirely sure about my theory, but perhaps they were given to those who visited the temple.

I ripped the cherry blossom leaf as I cut the mochi into pieces.

If all the other sweets were ones that made a dash along the elite highway, then this sweet was like a hard worker who had pulled themselves up from nothing...

Though its overall level was not much different from the others, its fundamental lineage was different. It was as though it had only reached great heights by incorporating a unique method of study...

But the mochi itself was flowery and gorgeous. It was pink, after all.

Meanwhile, the mitarashi dango were brown! They had no intention at all of decorating it! And it was on skewers! Was it going to be like fried meat?

I suppose the best thing to do was take the skewer by hand and then pull them off. Pulling it off with your teeth could injure you...

I pulled one off the stick and popped it in my mouth.

It was so...elastic... It was like a monster with absurdly high defense that was almost impossible to defeat...but why...?

This type of sweetness was also different from everything else... The aftertaste was almost salty-sweet!

I knew why I restrained myself at the end. These types of sweets were not strictly desserts, but they might have been related to some historical main dish. They sat quite heavily in the stomach.

Afterward, I ate so many different kinds of treats. Once my mouth was tired of the sugar, I reset my palate with some tea.

I had not been entirely comfortable here at first, but now I had a grasp on things!

A lady who worked for the shop approached me. "Excuse me, but your two hours are almost up. Please be ready to pay."

"Yes, of course." I reached for my wallet.

Hmm?

My wallet was gone. Wait, would I even be able to use royal currency in this strange land? Probably not...

...

.....

Oh dear, oh my! I'll be arrested...

I might not be able to prove my identity in this strange land...

Oh no.

This was bad.

I've made a mistake.

Please help me, Madam Teacher... Help me!

I clasped my hands together and prayed.

Please! Save me from this strange land!



“Oh, good, good. You’re awake.”

Madam Teacher’s face appeared in front of me.

“Was I...asleep...?”

I seemed to be in my bed. I suppose that meant everything was a dream.

“Halkara, you went to go pick fruit, but it fell right on your head and knocked you out. I gave you first aid by casting recovery spells, but you didn’t wake up right away.”

“...I remember now! Right, right.”

Laika had flown me to the south, where I went to study fruit.

And the one that fell on my head was both massive and hard enough to knock out an elf from Hrant... But I did get a very good sense of how firm it was right before I passed out.

“Boy, I was starting to worry you might not wake up at all~ It wouldn’t be very funny if you went straight to your next life in another world, huh~”

Another world? The land I dreamed of was most certainly another world.

But that was the world Madam Teacher used to live in, wasn’t it?

No, it couldn’t be. Because even if she *was* there, then it would have to be her past life. If I had been reborn there, then time would be flowing backward, which would mean some basic principle of...something had gone very wrong. That was something only a god could do.

Oh... But I do remember meeting someone who seemed like a goddess...

And she told me that she was sending me to the era in which Madam Teacher

used to live...

She also said that she was picking a city with a lot of cute girls...

And then I woke up in that place called Harajuku... And while I was worrying about how to pay my bill, I awoke from my dream.

It was not exactly clear where the dream started and ended, however. Dreams were often strange patchworks stitched together, so maybe everything after the fruit falling was a dream.

I suddenly realized that Madam Teacher's face was rather close to mine.

"Oh! What is it?! Are you giving me a kiss to wake me up?!"

"No. I thought you were awake, but you're still all spacey. I'm checking to see if your pupils are working."

"My mind is perfectly clear now. I believe I'm better." I stood up from my bed, and my legs were cooperating.

Madam Teacher patted me on the head. "Yeah, you look all better. Well, dinner's ready now, so let's go to the dining room."



All the usual suspects were there.

I saw Laika and Flatorte, who had taken me on my business trip the other day—the dragon duo. There was Falfa and Shalsha. And Rosalie the ghost floated above my head.

And Madam Teacher, right by my side.

"Just in time for dinner. What a relief," she said, and I noticed no one had touched their food yet.

"You're better, Big Sis Halkara. That makes Falfa happy~ ♪"

"Congratulations on your recovery."

Falfa and Shalsha offered their felicitations.

"Thank you! I will not die so easily!"

"I was a little scared, Sis Halkara. I couldn't see your soul at all...", Rosalie said.

What an eerie idea...

“Ah-ha-ha... I will not die so easily...”

“I’m glad you’re alive, Halkara. You’re gonna have to wear a helmet at work from now on,” Flatorte joked.

I’ll take that as loving teasing...

“Miss Halkara, shall I make something extra for your meal to celebrate your recovery?” Laika was as prim and proper as ever.

“How about something sweet? Hmm... You know what was good...Mont Blanc.”

Everyone stared at me blankly.

To be honest, I was not entirely sure why I said that word, either. That was the name of a treat I had in my dream, wasn’t it?

“‘Mon blan’? What is that? I have never heard of it...,” Laika remarked.

“Must be an elf food. We don’t have it in the blue dragons land,” Flatorte said.

“Huh, so you have Mont Blanc in this world, too. Wait...isn’t Mont Blanc a place name...? Is this a coincidence...?”

Judging by Madam Teacher’s reaction, I hadn’t just made it all up myself.

Which meant that the dream world was indeed where she used to live...

Was the girl I met there her when she was younger—or even in her past life...?

Oh, no, it couldn’t be. What are the chances?

“My apologies, please forget I said that! I will have my regular meal as I always do! Just as usual! Yes!” I exclaimed, trying to patch up my strange memories.

Meals at the house in the highlands typically consisted of some bread, soup, salad, and then boar meat fried with spices. And alcohol for those who wanted to drink. It was a rather common combination of foods, but it was nutritionally well-balanced.

“As always, thank you for the meal.”

Whenever Madam Teacher ate, she would put her hands together and give her thanks for the food. Perhaps it was a common practice in the land where she used to live.

“Ooh, there are a lot of vegetables today...” Shalsha sat quietly staring at her salad.

“You have to eat them, Shalsha. Here, add some dressing; that’ll make it taste better. And you won’t even notice it if you eat it with your meat.”

“Shalsha will eat it if Big Sis eats it.”

So her strategy was to drag her sister down with her.

“Falfa’s the big sister, so...so Falfa will eat it!” Falfa shoved her salad in her mouth.

Aww, this was wonderful. Just like a family, eating together at home in their natural environment~

As I watched them, Laika completely cleaned her plate of the salad. Wow, that was fast! And though she elegantly drank her soup, it vanished in an instant, too. Was it possible to eat something so elegantly so quickly?!

“Heh-heh-heh, this is the Flatorte Special!” Flatorte had ripped her bread lengthwise in the center, then stuffed her salad and some of the boar meat inside. It almost looked like junk food.

“Sis Halkara, you’re not eating at all. Are you okay?” Rosalie asked from above me.

Ah, I’d been enraptured by the usual sight at the dinner table.

“Oh, I’m eating, I’m eating! I’ve recovered! Truly, I have!”

Both the salad and soup were familiar flavors. I saw that it was Madam Teacher’s turn to cook today.

The boar meat was seasoned as it usually was, with the spices masking the gamy taste.

Ahhh...

It was fun trying out all sorts of new dishes, but a happy family get-together was also just as wonderful.

Home-cooked meals did not invite failure. It truly was serenity.

“I am perfectly happy with this. In the end, I will always come back here.”

“I can’t tell if you’re complimenting me or insulting me, Halkara...” Madam Teacher was looking at me with scorn in her eyes.

“Oh! I did not intend for it to be so strange! It means the taste helps me relax!”

Meanwhile, Shalsha was staring intently at Flatorte’s creation.

“By doing that, Shalsha can eliminate the sensation of eating vegetables with meat and bread. Shalsha should try that out.”

“I don’t think it’s very good table manners, but I’m glad you’re eating your vegetables.” Though Madam Teacher’s smile was strained, she was still praising Shalsha.

“You always come up with the most abnormal things,” Laika said in astonishment just as she was finishing her meat. She moved so neatly, but she was still so fast.

“I, the great Flatorte, am full of ingenuity! Unlike your hard head, Laika!”

“I would not call that ingenuity. You simply lack proper education.”

The two stared at each other without any real anger on their faces.

This was also part of the usual routine. Though I saw them do this every day, it left my heart strangely warm today.

“All right, you two, no fighting. You’ve already been living together for such a long time. Like **Wu and Yue in the same boat**, can’t you just put it all aside, please?” Madam Teacher said with a strained smile.

That was what I heard in my dream...

“Oh right. You wouldn’t understand that... Neither Wu nor Yue exist here...”

Which means... Could it be—?

Had I truly, even briefly, met Madam Teacher in her past life through a goddess's power?!

—And if not, then did I have the power to see dreams of the future?!

I'd found a new power within myself as I flitted between life and death! That was indeed a divine revelation—I'd even met a goddess! It was all coming together!

I took a big gulp of my drink.

All had been settled, so it was time to celebrate.

"You sure are enjoying that, Halkara," Madam Teacher said.

"The best drinks are the ones I can enjoy at the table with the family."

The End



☆My Memo☆

Sweets Buffet

Parfait du Cherie

The currency was different,
so I don't know the cost

Fun fact: When you eat sweets and
only sweets, you will get suddenly
very sleepy, so be careful...

I suppose it uses a lot of energy
to digest...



AFTERWORD

Book ten! Wow, what a nice ring that has.

Hello, this is Kisetu Morita.

I'm not sure how many people I've told, but it's been my goal for a long time to put out book ten of a series. It's not often you get popular enough to reach double digits, be it novel or manga.

Of course, there are plenty of perfectly good works that wrap up after one volume, and there are many stories that can't last any longer (for example, if the main character dies in the end), but those types of works aside, it's always been my dream to create something that reaches ten volumes.

The reason I've gotten this far is truly because of all the support you've given me! I know we're a little early on for acknowledgments, but please let me give my gratitude first. Thank you so much, truly!

To Benio, who has designed over twenty characters in this series alone.

To my editor, who has consistently supervised me since novelization began.

To the retail staff who have made their own pop-up stands to sell my books.

Thank you so, so much!

Now I have a few announcements, so let's move on to those!

First of all, next month in September, the Beelzebub spin-off *I've Been Killing Slimes for 300 Years and Maxed Out My Level Spin-Off: I Was a Bottom-Tier Bureaucrat for 1,500 Years, and the Demon King Made Me a Minister* will be releasing as a full novel! I know it's very long, but that's apparently the official title (even I've never said the whole official title out loud).

This book will contain the parts already included in *I've Been Killing Slimes*, Volumes 5–7 but also new chapters in the same vein! I've also fixed a few issues

in what was already published!

And of course, brand-new illustrations by Benio-sensei!

It's essentially a new product! And so please check it out if you get the chance!

Also in that same month, the first volume for that novel's comic adaptation by Meishi Murakami will be on sale at the same time as the novel!

And *also* in that same month, the fifth volume of the *I've Been Killing Slimes* manga adaptation will go on sale! The *I've Been Killing Slimes* adaptation is getting more and more characters and is getting more lively along with them. I expect it'll be exponentially more lively from here on out, so please look forward to it!

Since Beelzebub will be on the cover of this one, we could say that September will be a full Beelzebub festival.

But wait, there's more!

On the Manga UP! smartphone app, a third spin-off (after Halkara's, which was included in this volume, and Beelzebub's) about Laika the red dragon will soon begin serialization! I think it might have already started by the time this book comes out...?

It's called *The Red-Dragon Academy for Girls*! It's essentially *Maria-sama ga Miteru* plus *Sakigake!! Otokojuku*, Laika-style! It talks about Laika in her student years! If you're wondering what that might be all about, please check it out!

Laika's older sister Leila also appears quite a lot, so I think you'll enjoy seeing Laika's relationships with the other red dragons, which we don't often get to explore in *I've Been Killing Slimes* (since it's all in Azusa's perspective...).

And while we're here, according to the survey conducted with the Volume 8 and comic Volume 3 bundle campaign, the most popular character is Azusa, with number two being Laika (and Beelzebub coming in at third). So as the author, I would be delighted if Laika fans enjoyed this spin-off!

She's a hardworking girl but just a little off the pace from everyone else, which makes her cute—so I hope you get your fill of that in this spin-off!

I really hope you not only stick with the main series but also check out each spin-off and all the comic adaptations, too.

The series' media keeps slowly expanding, but I hope to keep my basic stance on the mellow, relaxing life as it is. I'd be happy if you kept a mellow watch over me, too.

The next volume is eleven. I write this series, and even I had no idea in the beginning that it would turn out to be this long. But I hope to take small, easy steps forward.

See you in Volume 11!

Kisetsu Morita



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